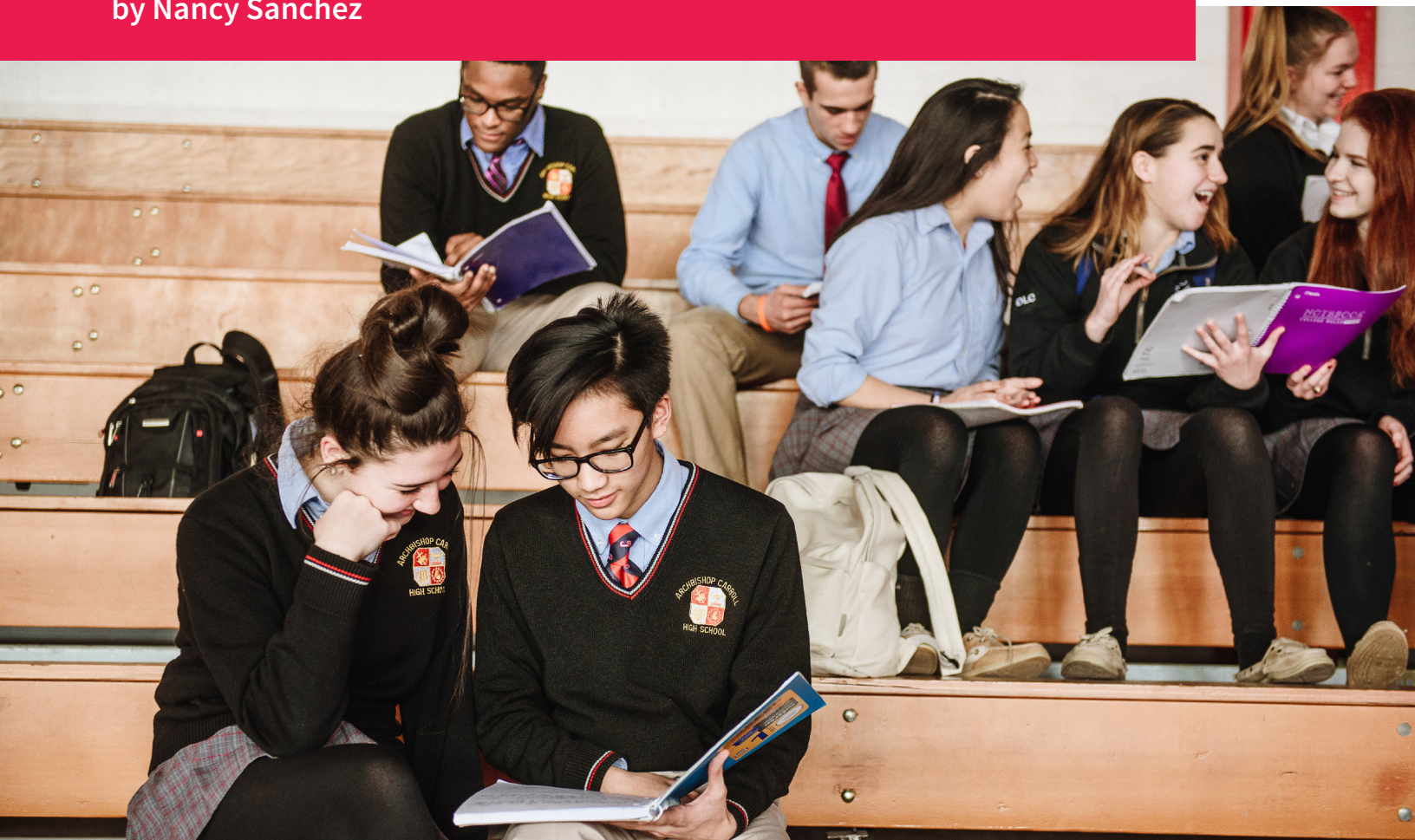


WHY CULTURAL DIVERSITY IS MAKING CATHOLIC SCHOOLS A BETTER PLACE TO LEARN

by Nancy Sanchez



In *Deuteronomy 10:19*, Moses shared one of the world’s foremost insights into cultural diversity. He tells his audience to “love those who are foreigners, for you yourselves were foreigners in Egypt.”

Thousands of years later, we as Americans find ourselves in a similarly mixed cultural situation. All our ancestors were foreign to this land once — whether one generation ago or one hundred — and it is with this perspective that we must strive to love, understand, and learn from the many cultures that make up our land.

Building a cultural bridge

At first glance, it may sound like the lesson here is one of racial or ethnic tolerance. But while ethnicity and culture certainly overlap, they are not the same. Ethnicity is passed on by genes and traits — how our bodies form and grow. But culture is passed on by the way a person lives their life, the language they speak, and the traditions their family and community embrace.

Why is this distinction so important? Because unlike ethnicity, culture can be shared. It can become a bridge across which two people of different backgrounds can exchange ideas, practices, and ways of thinking and communicating about the world. The most obvious method of doing so is, of course, language.

Over the last ten to fifteen years, researchers have found that children who are multilingual bring a dynamic to the classroom that enriches learning for all children. In the book [*Inclusive Literacy Teaching: Differentiating Approaches in Multilingual Elementary Classrooms*](#), the authors state that, “Being bilingual creates metalinguistic awareness about languages, helps people learn additional languages more easily, increases executive functioning skills, opens the door to new people and ideas, and makes a person more marketable in the job pool.” This awareness acts as an always-on cultural aura; it positively affects non-bilingual children to become more interested in a second language, and by extension, increases their skill sets as well.



An invisible impact

Sometimes, those skills are developed as part of what some parents may see as unnecessary work. They imagine a scenario where their English-fluent child is held back by the progress of a child who is less than fluent in English. Yet this couldn't be farther from the truth. Non-fluent students actually help bring to light educational issues among fluent peers that would otherwise remain undiscovered.

Recent research completed in Europe, Asia, Australia, and the United States has found that the presence of students who are not fluent in the majority language directly lead to an improvement

in the way teachers communicate. For instance, when a teacher is addressing only students of his/her language group with instructions on how to complete a reading and writing lesson, the teacher tends to gloss over details that may be necessary for several completely fluent students. Those students, who might be quietly falling behind, may slip through the cracks for years as assignments get harder. By simply having multilingual children in the same classroom, teachers are shown to provide more specific instruction that aids non-fluent and fluent children alike.



Paving the way together

Educational clarity is only one benefit of a culturally diverse classroom; an open heart is another. Young children of multicultural backgrounds who interact with one another are more open to having inclusive interactions as they mature into adulthood.

Recently I was visiting one of our Archdiocesan schools to register a Spanish child into kindergarten for the following school year. We began our school tour in the kindergarten class where the students in the after school CARES program were waiting to be picked up. I mentioned to the students that we were giving a tour of the classroom, when one student, John, spoke up. He was eager to help me show the family around. I asked John if it would be okay if I translated his version of the tour into Spanish for them. John was not only happy to have me translate, but also wanted me to know that he has three bilingual students in his classroom. The parents were impressed with both the school and with how

welcoming John was for embracing and interacting with them without hesitation. After the tour, the family let me know that they felt confident their daughter would do well at this AOPS school.

“Foreign” students can also share direct lessons about their heritage. Students who many may consider “Hispanic” or “Asian” have very different backgrounds, stories, and diverse sets of geographic, historic, and cultural knowledge. Thus children growing up in a multicultural classroom setting actually receive enhanced learning from their classmates. For instance, if a classroom is learning about India and an Indian student happens to be present, he or she can share some of the culture from their (or their parents’) native experiences. World studies can be enhanced with multicultural students, and inclusivity becomes a natural way of life.



Growing morally and academically

In the gospel of *Matthew 25:40*, Jesus tells us, “Truly I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of my brethren, you did it to Me.” As Catholics, we are called to include everyone in our lives — to respect them and love them as neighbors. This is a lesson many Christians have learned and known from an early age.

With today’s educational science, we have now learned that benevolence towards foreigners is more than “the right thing to do” — it also helps us and our children learn! This is why we at Archdiocese of Philadelphia Schools celebrate cultural diversity. It strengthens our students’ minds and spirits, and by extension, the minds and spirits of every member of the community with whom they interact.

Nancy Sanchez is the Field Coordinator for Hispanic Outreach at the Archdiocese of Philadelphia Schools, where she helps create more effective ways of increasing diversity and engaging with the local Hispanic community. She provides linguistic support and is capable of assessing complex community dynamics to determine the best method of outreach and evangelization.



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