



WHY DIVERSITY? By Catherine Henderson

Introduction

At GALS Inc., we approach diversity through engagement across lines of race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, and class. Though diversity takes on many forms, the bulk of the research conducted focuses on race and ethnicity. As an organization, we recognize the far-reaching impacts of ethnicity on economics, access, safety, and justice. We believe schools are an ideal setting to address the inextricable impact of race on young people's lives and to validate the unique experience of minority students. In the words of GALS Denver student Armanni Portee, "GALS taught me to value and respect everyone no matter what they look like, what they wear, how they act, and that goes for culture and ethnicity. The more you get to know a person for who they are, the more you can connect and value each other."

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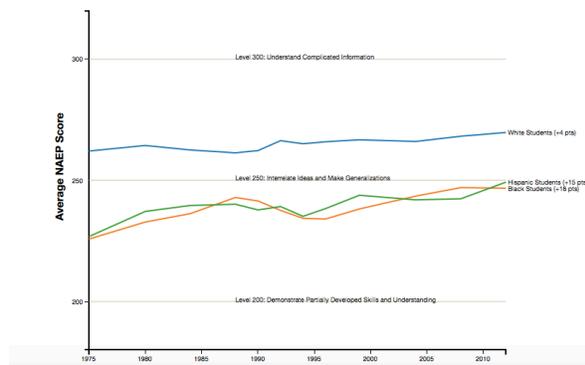
Research demonstrates the far-reaching benefits of diversity in a school setting. An amalgam of perspectives makes us smarter and better learners. It improves innovation, diligence, and open-mindedness. It makes leaders more aware and empathetic.

GALS Inc. embraces the challenges of creating a community immersed in its diversity. We intentionally integrate culturally relevant learning and conversations into classes every day, highlighting thoughtful leaders whose voices are disproportionately missing from popular culture and curricula. We ask our students to seek different perspectives and escape from their echo chambers. GALS Inc. recognizes the earnest, layered, and reflective work that is essential for achieving these goals. Each GALS school must be up to the challenge.

GALS Inc. serves students from the most privileged to the most marginalized; what bonds them is sisterhood. By exposing girls to diversity in its many forms, GALS Inc. equips people of all backgrounds with complex thinking skills and leadership abilities through self-possession and self-confidence in Embodied Education.

Diversity and education

Much of the discussion about race in education describes the achievement gap, or more aptly, the opportunity gap. Over the past 50 years, this gap has barely narrowed. According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress, the average African American eighth grader scores at the 22nd percentile in math, only



four percentage points higher than 50 years ago.¹ Stanford's Center for Education Policy Analysis (CEPA) provides excellent graphics to demonstrate these pervasive trends: <http://cepa.stanford.edu/educational-opportunity-monitoring-project/achievement-gaps/race/>.²

The opportunity gap results from a wide variety of institutionalized factors ranging from a lack of effective public schools in black and Hispanic neighborhoods to higher rates of poverty in minority communities.³ The opportunity gap not only excludes black and Latino students from a suitable education, it also costs the economy billions in wasted potential and leaves students unequipped to understand race relations.

Communities dedicated to giving minority students the skills they need to thrive are our best option to combat the opportunity gap. Research demonstrates that diversity improves school environments and makes them more conducive to learning. Educational potential, vitality, and stimulation in a school are directly related to composition of student body and staff.⁴ Unique information and experiences enhance creative thought. Margaret Neale of Stanford University designed a study to investigate the impact of diversity on innovation. She placed three white people in her control group and one black person and two white people in her experimental group. When asked to solve a murder mystery, diverse groups significantly outperformed their homogenous counterparts, working harder, coming up with better ideas, and processing information faster.⁵ The mere presence of one person who looked different improved innovation in a group and provoked more thought.

Other studies demonstrate that when members of a group notice social diversity, they change their expectations to anticipate differences of opinion, making people more diligent and open-minded. According to a study at Tufts University, compared to all-white juries, racially diverse juries were better at considering the facts, made fewer errors, and displayed openness to discussing the role of race in the case.⁶

It is a governing priority of GALS Inc. and all of its schools to create a space and community that honors minority students and marginalized groups. We provide opportunities to explore issues often viewed as "taboo" or charged. We discuss politics, power, privilege, race, class, gender, and sexual orientation as a way to enrich and

¹ Lauren Camera, "Student Scores in Reading and Math Drop," *US News & World Report*, 28 October 2015.

² "Racial and Ethnic Achievement Gaps." Stanford Center for Education Policy Analysis, 2016. (See graphic 1)

³ Corydon Ireland, "The achievement gap, a look into causes," *Harvard News Office*, 22 March 2007.

⁴ Anthony Antonia, Mitchell Chang, and Jeffery Milem, "Making Diversity Work on Campus: A Research-Based Perspective," *Association of American Colleges and Universities*, (1 January 2005.)

⁵ Karen Jehn, Gregory Northcraft, and Margaret Neale, "Why Differences Make a Difference: A Field Study of Diversity, Conflict, and Performance in Workgroups," *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 44, No. 4 (December 1999.)

⁶ Katherine Philips, "How Diversity Makes Us Smarter," *Scientific American*, (1 October 2014.)

expand the experience of not only minority students but also the collective classroom community.

At GALS Inc., we surround our students with peers of different races, ethnicities, sexual orientations, and gender identities. GALS students benefit from a rich academic climate that fosters discussion, breaks down stereotypes, and improves creativity and innovation. From our signature GALS Series class to community meetings to wellness teams, students embrace different ideas and perspectives as a methodology and practice in developing their own voices and their distinct form of self-agency.

Our students operate in a deeply pluralistic space: They can reflect on social privilege and the challenges of economic vulnerability and use this wisdom to inform their evolving identities and take power from their differences.

Diversity in Leaders

In order to raise courageous leaders in the modern world, we must expose young people to diversity. Profound connections with people different from us humanize highly politicized issues and allow those in positions of power to understand the far-reaching implications of their actions.

Research demonstrates a correlation between opinions about social issues and diversity on college campuses. According to Mitchell Chang, Professor of Education at UCLA, the extent to which a student sees racism as a prevalent issue, endorses affirmative action, and wants to see prison reform directly relates to the composition of the student body.⁷ He also demonstrated that more racial and ethnic groups on campus lead to a broader collection of thoughts and opinions of the student body.⁸ This is a classic example of John Stuart Mill's "marketplace of ideas." With an abundance of different beliefs, competition between them creates better, more intentionally held thoughts and opinions. Studies also show that fostering interracial friendships leads to enhanced self-confidence, motivation, cultural awareness, and commitment to social justice.⁹

Diversity is a crucial component of the leadership we embrace at GALS Inc. By fostering connection across lines of class and race, we raise girls to advocate for justice in all spheres they choose to occupy. Our students operate in a deeply pluralistic space: They can reflect on social privilege and the challenges of economic vulnerability and use this wisdom to inform their evolving identities and take power from their differences. In the words of GALS Denver senior Iriam Islas, "[GALS teachers] have taught me to be confident in who I am. They have taught me that I shouldn't be ashamed of being a Latina woman." A classroom community that addresses its diversity humanizes issues

⁷ Mitchell Chang, M Seltzer, and J Kim, "Diversity of opinions among entering college students: Does race matter?" *American Educational Research Association Conference*: Seattle, WA, 2001.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Anthony Antonia, Mitchell Chang, and Jeffery Milem, "Making Diversity Work on Campus: A Research-Based Perspective," *Association of American Colleges and Universities*, (1 January 2005.)

and is able to move away from divisive and polarizing political dialogue. GALS students understand that issues such as immigration, criminal justice, and poverty are not about politics; they are real issues that affect people today. GALS Inc. embraces diversity for the purpose of creating an evolved public conversation in the areas of education, gender equity, and civil discourse. Our students leave GALS prepared to be leaders in a diverse and ever-changing world.