

Our Stories As Windows and Mirrors

By Ruth Mendoza

Beyond their practical uses, windows and mirrors had little relevance in my daily life, or so I thought.

This was the case until the reflective nature of the SEED training, which began with filling out my application, invited me to consider the reasons behind my diversity work.

The year was 2002. The day was an ordinary morning. I was busily getting my children ready for school – making breakfast, getting them dressed, and finally brushing my youngest daughter’s hair. With her braids almost done, she unexpectedly asked, “Mom, can I bring a mirror to school?” Puzzled by her question, I paused briefly before adding the last details to her hair. The response already taking shape in my head was centered mainly on safety and the potential for the mirror to become a distraction in class. I felt justified in thinking that a kindergarten child did not need to carry such an object to school. After all, mirrors break easily and could lead to injury. I could imagine my daughter and her friends finding too-creative ways of using it in their play.

Regardless of any possible scenarios, I asked myself, why would she want to take a mirror to school? Rather than inquiring about my daughter’s request, my focus became fixed on her reflection on the dresser mirror in front of us. I noticed that she too was quietly and intently looking at it. Was she not happy with how I was fixing her hair? No, of course not, I told myself, she likes her dark, long hair braided. And just like that, the answer became clear. She wants to take a mirror to school to check on her hairstyle, I decided. With only a couple of minutes to spare before leaving for school, I began to swiftly explain why bringing a mirror to school was not an option. Still looking at the mirror, my daughter broke her silence as if I were not even speaking, “Mom, every day I go to school.” She pauses. “I see my friends and I see my teachers, but nobody looks like me. If I had a mirror I could look in it, and I won’t forget what I look like.”

My heart sank.

Her words replayed in my head incessantly at first and like a distant echo as my day progressed. My maternal instincts dictated that I should fix this problem, and fix it quickly so the burden could be lifted from my daughter, but I did not know how or whether it could be fixed. Her words taunted me. Yes, we were perhaps the only Latino family in the school and we did stand out in this predominantly white environment, but shouldn’t the benefits of a great education outweigh any sacrifices made along the way? In the days and months that followed, I struggled to reconcile her heartbreaking experience with my hopes of providing my children with the opportunities that I could only dream about in my native Bolivia.

Since then I have been on a journey to find open and engaging ways in which to address issues of diversity in my school community. This journey led me to the SEED Project on Inclusive Curriculum, where I was first introduced to SEED Co-Director Emily Style’s work.

While my daughter's words point to the lack of being physically reflected by those around her, Emily Style's metaphor of windows and mirrors offers a broader application (Style, 1988). It illustrates that as we undertake meaningful sharing of our experiences/stories with others, we may encounter both reflections (mirrors) of our own story, and windows into other people's experiences. The idea of finding mirrors and/or windows in each story was appealing to me as it opened a door to new possibilities, such as the possibility of breaking down stereotypes, gaining fresh perspectives, and knowing more about the particular feelings of each child.