

Cultural Proficiency: *changing the conversation*

Culturally proficient school leaders are committed to educating all students to high levels through knowing, valuing and using students' cultural backgrounds, languages and learning styles.

Tahoe Elementary School in Sacramento, like schools throughout the U.S., recently faced the reality that student achievement is highly correlated with race, ethnicity, gender and social class. The educators and staff at the school embarked on a journey of inquiry of their approaches to teaching mathematics and language arts. Additionally, they examined their own interactions with their students, the students' parents/guardians, and the community they serve.

As part of their continuous improvement approach, Principal Kathryn Currie and her leadership team engaged with educational consultants/facilitators to guide their focus on developing a culturally proficient learning community. In what ways does the vignette below reflect the prevailing conversations in your school about serving demographically diverse groups of students? The following conversation occurred three years into the Tahoe Elementary School continuous improvement process.

Facilitator: *For the past three years you have been using the tools of cultural proficiency along with your school data to examine your curricula and instruction. As you reflect on your progress, what is occurring now that did not occur three or more years ago?*

By Randall B. Lindsey, Kikanza Nuri Robins, Delores B. Lindsey and Raymond D. Terrell

First-grade teacher: *Hmmm ... Well one of the changes I see is that now we are more prone to talk about how we can serve students differently than we might have before.*

Facilitator: *When you say, “serve students differently,” how is that different from before?*

Instructional assistant: *Well, to be blunt, we used to blame the students and their parents for not achieving.*

First-grade teacher: *Yes, he is correct, we used to do that. We made comments like, “What can you expect when kids come from neighborhoods like this.” Now we don’t regard their neighborhoods or culture as a handicap. We are much more conscious of what we say and make every effort to know the assets the kids bring to school and how we can build on those assets.*

This conversation is representative of the shift in thoughts and actions of the educators and staff at the school. The culture of the school has shifted because of the intentional efforts of the educators and staff. The principal has been a pivot point for using data and the tools of cultural proficiency to change conversations from “What is wrong with the students?” to “How can we better serve our students?” This latter tact is used when current practices in instruction, working with parents/guardians or curriculum are not effective.

In essence, these educators have taken control of their own professional learning and the result is that their students have increased access to high quality educational experiences, resulting in improving academic achievement for students in all demographic groups.

Cultural proficiency as an educational leadership lens

Culturally proficient educational leaders are effective in cross-cultural situations that affect their students, the communities they serve, and the educators and staff members in their schools. Culturally proficient educational leaders are committed to educating all students to high levels through knowing, valuing and using the students’ cultural backgrounds, languages and learning styles within the selected curricular and instructional contexts.

Leaders who are committed to leading our schools in a way that all students have access to the benefits of a democratic system can use the tools of cultural proficiency as a template for their personal and professional development. The tools of cultural proficiency provide us with:

- Guiding principles on which to build an ethical and professional frame for effective cross-cultural communication and problem-solving;
- A continuum of behaviors that enable us to diagnose our values and behavior in such a way that we can better influence the policies and practices of our profession;
- Essential elements expressed in terms of standards of personal and professional conduct that serve as a framework for intentionally responding to the academic and social needs of the cultural groups in our school and community; and
- Barriers that serve as caveats to the use of the guiding principles and essential elements.

The cultural proficiency toolkit

Cultural proficiency comprises an interrelated set of tools that pose significant questions to prompt reflection and the opportunity to improve our leadership practice in service of others:

- Are we who we say we are?
- How do we assess who we are?
- Do our actions align with who we say we are?
- What gets in our way of being who we say we are?

The tools provide us with the means by which to lead our personal lives and perform our professional responsibilities in a culturally proficient manner.

Cultural proficiency represents a leadership paradigm

Cultural proficiency is a mindset for how we interact with all people, irrespective of their cultural memberships. Cultural proficiency is a worldview that carries explicit values, language and standards for effective personal interactions and professional practices. Cultural proficiency is a 24/7 approach to our personal and professional lives. Most importantly, cultural proficiency is not a set of independent activities or strategies that we learn to use with others – our students, colleagues or community members.

Educators who commit to culturally proficient practices represent a paradigmatic shift from the too prevalent view of regarding “underperforming” cultural demographic groups of students as problematic to the empowering view of what needs to be done differently in order to educate students.

Tool No. 1 – The Guiding Principles of Cultural Proficiency addresses the question: Are we who we say we are? The Guiding Principles of Cultural Proficiency are a set of value statements that, when taken together, shed light on the extent to which we are committed to mission statements that are authentic in serving all students. Even more explicitly, a key question in considering the guiding principles is this: Is what we say as school leaders congruent with what we do?

The guiding principles support us as we develop a coherent approach to educating all students in ways that honor and build on who they are as people and as members of our complex, often contradictory, society. The guiding principles provide a moral framework for conducting one’s self and school/district in an ethical fashion by acknowledging that:

- Culture is a predominant force in society,
- People are served in varying degrees by the dominant culture,
- People have individual and group identities,
- Diversity within cultures is vast and significant,
- Each cultural group has unique cultural needs,
- The best of both worlds enhances the capacity of all,
- The family, as defined by each culture, is the primary system of support in the education of children, and
- School systems must recognize that marginalized populations have to be at least bicultural and that this status creates a unique

set of issues to which the system must be equipped to respond.

Opportunity for self-assessment: To what extent do your leadership behaviors and those of your colleagues align with the guiding principles?

One of the benefits of the accountability movement has been the use of disaggregated data. The disparities among cultural/demographic groups of students are historical and did not emerge with the Public School Accountability Act or No Child Left Behind. The guiding principles provide the opportunity to use students' cultures as assets as we seek more effective ways to educate all of our students.

Students come to our schools and classrooms as members of cultural groups – faith, ethnic, racial, gender, sexual orientation, ability, socio-economic – that can serve as the foundations for their continued learning in our schools and classrooms.

Tool No. 2 – The cultural proficiency continuum provides the opportunity for responding to this question: How do we assess who we are? After embracing the value for diversity that emerges from the guiding principles, the continuum provides a metric by which we can assess our professional values and behaviors and our schools' policies and practices.

The Cultural Proficiency Continuum

The points of the continuum are:

1. Cultural destructiveness – Educating in a manner that you seek to eliminate the cultures of others in all aspects of the school and in relationship with the community served.

2. Cultural incapacity – Educating in a way that you trivialize other cultures and seek to make the culture of others appear to be wrong.

3. Cultural blindness – Educating where you don't see or acknowledge the culture of others and you choose to ignore the discrepant experiences of cultures within the school.

4. Cultural precompetence – Educating with an increasing awareness of what you and the school don't know about working in diverse settings. At this level of development you and the school can move in a positive, constructive direction or you can falter, stop and possibly regress.

5. Cultural competence – Educating with your personal values and behaviors and the school's policies and practices being aligned in a manner that is inclusive with cultures that are new or different from you and the school.

6. Cultural proficiency – Educating as an advocate for life-long learning for the purpose of being increasingly effective in serving the educational needs of cultural groups in your school and community. Holding the vision that you and the school are instruments for creating a socially just democracy (Lindsey, Nuri Robins & Terrell, 2009).

First, note the manner in which the continuum is constructed: The first three points of the continuum focuses on them (your stu-

dents and their culture) as being problematic. Cultural destructiveness, cultural incapacity and cultural blindness seek to have you looking out Collins' (2001) "window" and describing students with terms such as "under-performing."

The next three points of the continuum focus on your practice of transformational leadership. Cultural precompetence, cultural competence and cultural proficiency have you looking in Collins' "mirror" and examining your educational practices and seeking to know how you are under-serving your students and their communities so you can learn to serve them differently (the inside-out approach).

Opportunity for self-assessment: Where do you place yourself on the continuum with respect to the various student cultural groups in your school/district?

Tool No. 3 – The essential elements of cultural competence respond to the question: Do our actions align with who we say we are? It is fair to assume that as a reader of this journal, we are all interested in the success of all students in our schools and, therefore, are interested in having our actions align to the right side of the continuum – specifically cultural competence – which presents essential elements as standards, or a lens, for culturally competent values, behaviors, policies and practices?

• **Assessing cultural knowledge** – Leading the learning about others' cultures, about how educators and the school as a whole react to others' cultures, and what you need to do to be effective in cross-cultural situations. Also, leading the learning about the school and its grade levels and de-

partments as cultural entities.

• **Valuing diversity** – Creating informal and formal decision-making groups inclusive of people whose viewpoints and experiences are different from yours and the dominant group at the school. This will enrich conversations, decision making and problem solving.

• **Managing the dynamics of difference** – Modeling problem-solving and conflict-resolution strategies as natural and normal processes within the organizational culture of the schools and the cultural contexts of the communities of your school.

• **Adapting to diversity** – Being the lead learner at your school about cultural groups different from your own and the ability to use others' cultural experiences and backgrounds in all school settings.

• **Institutionalizing cultural knowledge** – Making learning about cultural groups and their experiences and perspectives an integral part of the school's professional development (Terrell and Lindsey, 2009).

Opportunity for self-assessment: How might the essential elements serve as a lens for your leadership practices?

Tool No. 4 – Barriers to cultural proficiency are present and are embedded in the question: What gets in our way of being who we say we are? In the manner that the guiding principles provide a moral compass for culturally proficient actions, there are barriers



to achieving culturally proficient actions. The barriers, when present in our behaviors or the practices in our schools, exist together in combination, not as isolated events:

• **Resistance to change** – Many educators and schools struggle with change that involves issues of culture. For those who are resistant, change often is experienced as an outside force that judges current practices as deficient or defective. Whether accurate or not, an adversarial relationship exists between those forcing the change and the members of the school.

• **Systems of oppression** – That racism, sexism, heterosexism, ableism and classism exist is without refute, historically and currently. Data are on the side of documenting and describing the ill effects of such systems. Being able to understand oppression as a systemic issue apart from personal behavior is important.

• **A sense of privilege and entitlement** – Systems of oppression have two effects – on those who are harmed and to those who benefit. Those harmed from systemic oppressions respond from an emotional connection as well as an awareness of practices that impact them negatively. Many of those who benefit from historical and current practices are oblivious to the negative effects of systemic oppression because they can choose not to see how others are affected negatively (Terrell & Lindsey, 2009). For example, NAEP (National Assessment of Educational Progress) has documented achievement gaps since 1971, but we in education have not addressed it as an educational issue until the advent of state and federal accountability movements (Perie, 2005).

Barriers are often manifested in statements such as: It is not me that needs to change. I have been a successful educator for years. These kids/parents just need to get a clue! Similarly, it is rare to find the person who doesn't acknowledge that racism, ethnocentrism and sexism exist in our society, but what they often fail to see is that when one group of people loses rights and privileges due to systemic oppression, those rights and privileges accrue to others in often unacknowledged or unrecognized ways. It is when one recognizes one's entitlement that he or she has the ability to make choices that benefit the education of children and youth.

A conversation gap

Too often, educators and educational policy makers experience a conversation gap when focusing on the achievement issues of students that are based in students' cultural differences. The gap in conversation, which is often unrecognized and unacknowledged, is educators not having the perspective to see systemic roadblocks that have been, and are, impeding the academic success of socio-economic, racial, ethnic, gender or language groups of our students. This selective invisibility leads to a sense of privilege and entitlement for educators.

While systems of oppression impose barriers for members of cultural groups, concomitant systems of privilege and entitlement impose barriers for educators. The barriers erected by a sense of privilege and entitlement involve a skewed sense of reality that im-

pedes one's ability to pursue ethical and moral avenues in meeting the academic and social needs of cultural groups of students.

The position of privilege often fosters educators voicing biased or ill-informed assumptions about parents from some cultural groups. Typical of such assumptions are comments such as:

“Their parents won't come to parent conferences because they don't care about the education of their child.”

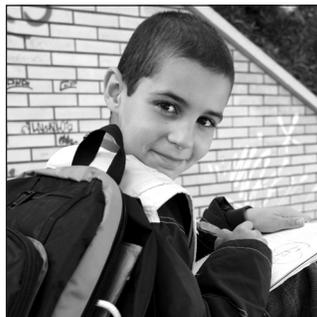
“Why try to help them. They will just end up as gang-bangers, just like their dad!”

“Why should I learn anything about their culture? This is our country, let them learn about us!”

Educators who make comments like these are in need of different lenses, tools and structures to understand the obstacles their students face and their learning needs for success in school. As a leader, when you are aware of these barriers and needs you can use the guiding principles, the continuum, and the essential elements to frame conversations with fellow educators about how parents and students who are culturally different from you behave and learn.

Cultural proficiency is an approach for surfacing educators' assumptions and values that undermine the success of some student groups, and a lens for examining how we include and honor the cultures and educational strengths and needs of all students in the educational process.

The educators at Tahoe Elementary School are well on their way to becoming a culturally proficient learning community. The school has moved its API score from 556 to 765 and exited Program Improvement last year, much to the delight of the educators and parents/guardians in the school community. ■



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