

COMMUNITY EVENTS OFFER CULTURAL LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

Culturally proficient schools have carefully developed an awareness of the communities they serve. The teachers and leaders know who lives in the community, value and build upon the assets students and families bring, and recognize the challenges in the local environment that affect both school and community. Therefore, developing strong relationships with the community is an important step in creating culturally proficient schools. Because teachers and school leaders may be reluctant to engage with the community out of fear or lack of understanding, we recommend integrating community-based activities as a component of developing educators' cultural proficiency.

There is a wide array of community-based exercises to use with educators. Some are designed to help develop cultural understanding in all participants. Others aim to foster connections between school and home. Ultimately, community-based activities can engage educators and community members in collective action to build stronger communities. But for those new to community learning, the place to begin is by encouraging teachers to leave the school building and step into the streets outside to see cultural differences in context and experience being in an unfamiliar environment.

Attending community events is one way to do this. Some events provide opportunities for cultural learning more than others, which is why selecting the event is an important consideration. This is an excellent place for direction from a professional developer or school leader. If left completely on their own, educators may choose events that are only slightly outside their comfort zones, resulting in little growth. Some participants may attend events so unfamiliar that they have no frame of reference from which to understand them. To prevent these situations, school leaders should create a list of appropriate learning events.

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WHAT KIND OF EVENTS?

When people of the same culture gather, they tend to express cultural norms more freely than in cross-cultural groups. In a monocultural context, shared cultural norms are more visible, allowing even those not familiar with the culture to "see" what behavior is expected and valued by the group. How people greet each other, what they talk about, how closely they stand to one another, and how they express themselves are all observable aspects of culture. At cross-cultural events with multiple culture groups present, people are not as likely to adhere strictly to the norms of their culture group. In these situations, norms are much more difficult to distinguish, particularly for those who are still developing a cultural knowledge base. Though cross-cultural events are instructive for those with deeper cultural knowledge, events associated with a particular culture group are more appropriate initially.

Another factor in selecting an event is whether the setting allows for interaction. While educators will learn through observation alone, they will gain greater understanding with some level of social interaction. Additionally, interaction promotes the use of cross-cultural communication skills. Sometimes such conversations can put educators in the fortunate position of being in a cultural-informant relationship, where a member of the culture group acts as a guide to explain what is happening and to answer questions. Facilitators will want to steer participants toward events that are conducive to interaction. This does not guarantee educators will interact, but at least the opportunity is there.

A final consideration is whether the event is private or public. Public events, such as street fairs, music festivals, and community celebrations are open to anyone. This makes them easily accessible, and on the surface, these events may seem to be more comfortable for an outsider. Yet many such events are sponsored by commercial vendors and have little to do with the culture group. Attending this kind of event may serve to reinforce stereotypes rather than facilitate learning. Private events such as family celebrations, neighborhood gatherings, ceremonies, religious services, and organization meetings are excellent venues for gaining cultural understanding. However, private events are



In each issue of *JSD*, Sarah W. Nelson, above, and Patricia L. Guerra write about the importance of and strategies for developing cultural awareness in teachers and schools. The columns are available at www.nsd.org.



intended only for people who have been invited or are a recognized member of the group.

How does the professional developer negotiate this dilemma between avoiding public events that are connected with culture in name only and gaining appropriate access to private events? The answer lies in the professional developer doing work upfront to connect with respected community members. Community members are all too glad to include educators in their activities when they know educators are there to learn and to develop authentic relationships. Professional developers can facilitate such a relationship by contacting representatives of key community organizations to explain the work the school is doing toward cultural proficiency and ask for guidance in identifying appropriate events. Ethnic chambers of commerce, community centers, multicultural schools, religious leader groups, and groups such as NAACP, National Council of La Raza, and American Indian advocacy networks are examples of the kinds of organizations that can be a resource for the professional developer.

PREPARING FOR THE EVENT

Background information. Find out as much as possible about event logistics. When participants know the time, location, and cost, they are like to experience a positive start to the event. Few of us are open to learning when we've gotten lost, arrived late, or been unprepared financially. Knowing what activities will be available is also helpful. In some cases, there are many activities to choose from at a single event. Some educators may be open to spontaneously selecting activities and seeing what happens. For others, this level of uncertainty may detract from the experience. The facilitator can help by gathering information and making this available to participants.

Inviting someone who is familiar with the event to meet with educators beforehand is also beneficial. Informing participants about what to expect and answering questions will dispel apprehension. Additionally, the informant can help educators make meaning of the experience during the debriefing process that follows the event.

Group size. In assigning educators to events, consider the number of participants in relation to the size of the event. For small events, the presence of more than two or three "outsiders" may significantly alter group dynamics. Even for larger events, educators should attend individually or in pairs and avoid gathering in larger groups. Large groups discourage participants from interacting and may cause the group to behave as sightseers. This inhibits learning and may lead to resentment on the part of those hosting the event.

Participation. Once at the event, educators should be ready and willing to participate, not merely observe.

Encourage them to talk to people, ask questions, listen and watch as people interact, and try to understand what is happening in light of their cultural knowledge. They should also make mental note of how they are feeling. How did it feel when they first walked into the event? What was it like to be in the minority? How did they react when they were not quite certain what to do? Did they encounter conflicts? How did they react? What actions did they take to be an active member of the group? How did members of the group respond? What cultural differences did they notice?

LEARNING FROM THE EVENT

Ask participants to reflect on their experience immediately afterward. Have them write a description of what they saw and heard and how they felt. This is best done individually so each person is able to process the experience without being influenced by the perceptions of others. Often, two people who attend an event together will have differing views about the experience, which leads to rich discussions. If the two immediately reflect on the experience collectively, they may ignore the differences in their perceptions in an effort to come to consensus.

Bring the group together to share reflections. Have someone record key ideas. Begin by giving a brief description of the event and then asking each person to share his/her reflection. Ask participants to listen carefully for commonalities and anomalies in responses. If the group attended more than one event, describe one event and have each person who attended share his or her perspective. Continue until all participants have had a chance to discuss the event they attended and to share reflections.

As a facilitator, a key role in this type of learning is leading the group in making sense of this experience. Ask the group to consider such questions as: What aspects of culture did they see? How were they able to tie this to previous learning? What do they have questions about? What assumptions did they have going into the event? Were these dispelled? How comfortable were they in this setting? What behaviors did they use that worked? What behaviors did not work? What conflicts occurred? How were these resolved? What was it like to engage in cross-cultural communication? What did they learn about themselves? Would they attend similar events again?

As the group processes this experience, ask them to consider what they are taking away from it that will help them build stronger relationships with the students and families they serve. Listen carefully as their responses are a guide to whether they are ready for more advanced community-based learning or whether they may need other development to be prepared to effectively engage community members. ■