

## BEGIN BY DEVELOPING AWARENESS AND ASSESSING READINESS

As the demographic landscape shifts, schools encounter increasingly diverse student populations. Districts and schools are turning to staff developers to help teachers develop cultural proficiency that will allow them to be successful in this changing environment. The question for staff developers is how best to support teachers in gaining a new set of skills and attitudes.

Because developing cultural proficiency requires gaining not only cultural knowledge but also new cognitive skills, we suggest staff developers provide multiple opportunities over time for teachers to acquire the knowledge and skills. We have developed a four-stage process for accomplishing this goal. Our process is based on a culture-general approach, which uses a framework for understanding how cultures vary rather than giving specific information about individual cultures.

In this column, we discuss the first two stages, which give facilitators a way to introduce an entire faculty to the concept and importance of cultural proficiency. The activities in these stages will also give the facilitator who leads this initiative an idea about which faculty members may be interested in further exploration of cultural proficiency. We will address the next two stages of the process in a future column.

### STAGE 1: RAISING THE ISSUE

Because the professional and popular media has so widely emphasized the achievement gap, most educators are aware that not all groups of students are performing at the same level on achievement tests. What many educators do not realize is the problem goes beyond test scores.

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Without this awareness, educators may not understand the need to develop cultural proficiency.

To raise awareness of the issue, provide faculty with an opportunity to examine inequities in school data. You might do this in a series of faculty meetings or in a day-long professional development session. What is important is getting data in front of faculty so they can participate in a discussion. You may want to begin with test data because teachers are so familiar with it, but do not let the investigation end there. Look at discipline data, special education, advanced academic programs, course failures, retention rates, and parent participation disaggregated by race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status. What do these data show? Typically, the data will illustrate patterns of inequity. Facilitators will need to encourage the group to acknowledge inequities so that everyone is aware of the need for change.

An important note about this activity is that facilitators should present the data in a depersonalized way. Mask the data or use school-level data without individual teacher or student names attached. Depersonalization allows teachers to examine data without feeling attacked or as if they have to defend their work. This will lead to a much more productive conversation.

Be prepared for a variety of reactions. Many teachers will identify patterns of inequity across the data, though they may suggest that parents and students need to change rather than the school. Others may remain unusually quiet. Some may even express disdain. Showing data in itself does not shift deficit thinking about inequities, particularly if teachers lack cultural knowledge. In many cases, discussing data surfaces deficit thinking. This is where a skilled staff developer with a cultural lens is critical. When facilitators allow deficit beliefs to go unaddressed, they send the message that such beliefs are founded. Offer alternative explanations or perspectives to counter deficit beliefs, but be careful not to get “hooked” into an argument. After the session, check in with teachers to hear their concerns.

Once facilitators assist teachers in becoming aware of inequities evident in the data, the next step is helping faculty realize that they can work to overcome inequities. Facilitators can focus the group on solutions by having



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



teachers read stories of educators who have successfully addressed inequities in their schools. Providing faculty an opportunity to read success stories helps develop efficacy and opens the door to the possibility of success in your own school.

Whether faculty read the books on their own or in study groups, follow up with a large group discussion about the factors that contributed to success. This will help faculty identify the assets the school already has and highlight those that need to be developed. Additionally, the discussion will give you insight into the perspectives teachers have about the issues. Some teachers will likely be inspired by the success stories. Others may dismiss them as exaggerations or as inapplicable to your school or student population. Make note of this because the responses are an indication of teachers' readiness to further explore cultural proficiency.

### STAGE 2: ASSESSING READINESS

To further assess readiness, engage the faculty in a cross-cultural simulation designed to help participants understand how culture influences our thoughts and actions and how cultural differences can lead to conflict when people misunderstand them. Cultural simulations such as *Barnaga* and *Bafa Bafa* are available from commercial vendors. Others, such as *Brief Encounters*, are available free from the U.S. Peace Corps web site ([www.peacecorps.gov/www/educators/lessonplans/section.cfm?sid=4](http://www.peacecorps.gov/www/educators/lessonplans/section.cfm?sid=4)).

The most important aspect of cross-cultural simulations is debriefing after the simulation. Debriefing allows participants to discuss the experience and its relation to schooling and to raise questions. As faculty respond in the debriefing, pay close attention to what participants say. Look for those who seem to accept cultural variation without judgment and who appear open to further exploration of cultural difference.

### DIFFERENTIATED TRAINING

By going through these two stages, you will have helped faculty understand why cultural proficiency is important and provided them with a glimpse of what training to develop cultural proficiency looks like. While you may want every teacher to continue with cultural proficiency training, we strongly recommend that you differentiate the learning experiences at this point and go forward only with teachers who have demonstrated an interest and willingness to engage in the process.

In-depth learning in cultural proficiency requires participants to not only expand their cultural knowledge, but

#### Inspiration

For a list of books with success stories and effective strategies, see the online version of this article at [www.nsd.org/jsd/](http://www.nsd.org/jsd/).

also challenges them to examine their personal beliefs. Looking inward is difficult. Often, teachers discover they hold prejudiced or biased beliefs about certain groups of people. This can be unsettling, particularly for educators who would say that they believe in the ability of all children. Not everyone is ready for this kind of introspection. Those who are made to engage in the process before they are

ready do not benefit substantially and frequently disrupt the process for others.

Although only part of the faculty will continue with the next stages of learning, the entire faculty must remain engaged with the overall goal of the project. Faculty need to understand that the school or district expects every teacher to become culturally proficient. Those who are not yet ready for more advanced training need opportunities to develop readiness.

To begin the differentiated training process, meet with the faculty and review the activities from stages 1 and 2. Emphasize what participants learned and why the group is focused on better serving diverse learners. Explain that you are going to continue the training with a smaller group and that you will start with volunteers, noting the rest of the faculty will receive the training in the future. Articulate your plan for ensuring everyone receives the next stages of training.

Many schools use a three-year cycle in which one-third of the faculty participates in training the first year, another one-third the second year, and the remainder of the staff the third year. Such a model allows time for buy-in and builds capacity because those who initially receive training can provide support for later training groups. In most cases, as long as the project remains a school focus, teachers who initially are reluctant to engage in in-depth training are ready by the third year. If there are a few holdouts, the critical mass of those who have been trained makes it uncomfortable for these remaining few to stay at the school.

To keep momentum going while you are working with cohorts of teachers, continue using activities similar to those in stages 1 and 2. Have teachers regularly collect and analyze data to see whether the school or district is making progress in addressing inequities. Make additional success stories available through book clubs, excerpts in newsletters, or discussions in faculty meetings. Periodically engage the faculty in activities to build cultural understanding. Most importantly, continue to discuss cultural proficiency and be sure school or district planning documents reflect this emphasis. As with any initiative, the more that educators give prominence to developing cultural proficiency, the more likely they are to succeed. ■