



Nelson



Guerra

A colleague's challenge offers a chance to improve our work and extend its impact

We have always said that becoming culturally proficient is a journey, not a destination. Our four-stage model for developing cultural proficiency is based on the notion of continuous growth. And even as long as we have been working in this area, we have always said that we, too, are on the journey and must continue to learn.

We recently found our commitment to the process of continuous growth challenged when a colleague commented on our professional development model. Our colleague, who is clearly committed to educational equity and on occasion has been a presenter in our professional development sessions, suggested that our model for developing culturally proficient educators falls short. He said that by limiting our focus to cultural, linguistic, and economic diversity, we were leaving out other important forms of diversity and suggesting that these

are the only forms of diversity that count and need be acknowledged in classrooms and schools. In particular, our colleague was concerned that we were not addressing sexual orientation and the needs of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) students. We responded to his critique by explaining that we discuss diversity in a variety of forms in our professional development sessions and that we help educators understand that cultural identity is based on many factors, including religion, geographic region, age, disability, and sexual orientation. We provided examples of times that we had challenged educators who were claiming to support all students in spite of evidence that suggested certain groups of students, namely lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender students, were being excluded. Our colleague acknowledged the importance of the work and then said, "But it's not enough." And he is right.

When we began our work nearly two decades ago, issues of race, ethnicity, language, and economics were the most visible to us. This was the time when accountability systems were coming into place and data disaggregated by these categories were the topic of discussion. We worked in schools with high populations of students of color, English language learners, and students living in poverty. We saw the inequities our students and families endured every day. Eradicating these inequities became the focus of our work. As we were invited to work with schools outside of our own region, we began to expand our focus to explicitly include multiple forms of diversity. We worked with schools that were concerned with meeting the needs of diverse religious populations. We worked with schools that had rising numbers of immigrants from Southeast Asia and the Middle East. We worked with schools that had concerns about serving special education students. Each school we worked with helped us to think about how our model could be applied to diversity in all its forms.

But even as our understanding was changing and our model developing, we hung onto the language of culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse students and families. Undoubtedly, part of our reason for doing so was



In each issue of *JSD*, Sarah W. Nelson and Patricia L. Guerra write about the importance of and strategies for developing cultural awareness in teachers and schools. Nelson (swnelson@txstate.edu) is an assistant professor in the Department of Education and Community Leadership and associate director of the International Center for Educational Leadership and Social Change at Texas State University-San Marcos, and co-founder of Transforming Schools for a Multicultural Society (TRANSFORMS). Guerra (pg16@txstate.edu) is an assistant professor in the Department of Education and Community Leadership at Texas State University-San Marcos and co-founder of Transforming Schools for a Multicultural Society (TRANSFORMS). Columns are available at www.learningforward.org/news/authors/guerranelson.cfm.

convenience. This language was familiar to us and to the schools we worked with. The No Child Left Behind Act requires that schools examine student achievement by race, language, and class. When school leaders discover that achievement is not equitable, they often turn to professional developers like us who promoted strategies for increasing achievement for culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse students.

In truth, we also held onto the language as a strategy for getting into schools. While NCLB made talking about issues of equity not only acceptable, but almost mandatory, only certain kinds of diversity were included in this discussion. Data on the number of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender students and their achievement are not collected by state education agencies or the U.S.

DEVELOPING CULTURAL PROFICIENCY: A 4-STAGE MODEL

Stage 1: Raise the issue.

Through examination of all kinds of student data, educators see that a lack of cultural proficiency impacts student learning opportunities.

Stage 2: Assess readiness.

Those leading professional learning conduct simulations and assessments to determine learners' readiness to engage in cultural proficiency work and differentiate learning accordingly.

Stage 3: Increase knowledge of cultural variation and surface deficit beliefs.

A variety of learning options encourages learners to investigate their own culture and its influence on teaching and to explore the cultural backgrounds of students and community members.

Stage 4: Challenge and reframe deficit beliefs.

In this stage, teachers have opportunities to explore and discuss their beliefs and practices, with facilitators helping them to shift their thinking and actions to create equitable learning for all students.

Department of Education. As a result, most schools are not focused on equity issues related to these students and their families. In some cases, educators are aware there are great educational inequities for LGBT students but do not believe their communities are open to a discussion about this. In other cases, educators and school communities are hostile to the concerns of LGBT students. In either case, the schools generally are not looking for professional developers who will raise equity issues for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender students and families. Our unstated assumption was that if we were explicit about a focus on these students, educators might not be willing to engage in a discussion about equity issues. Our strategy was to begin with the issues educators were most familiar with and then incorporate wider issues of diversity in our discussions and professional development sessions. In using this strategy, we have been able to raise awareness about issues of equity for LGBT students and families. At the same time, our failure to explicitly name sexual orientation as a focus of our work has contributed to the marginalization of LGBT students and families. Silence conveys consent. By not explicitly including LGBT students as a focus of our work, we have unwittingly reinforced the idea that it is acceptable to ignore these students and families.

In our last column, we highlighted an educator who was courageous enough to speak up against racism in her school. We implored all educators to follow her example and do what is right, not what is easy. Now it's our turn. Our colleague has challenged us to rethink the language we use to convey our work and to be more explicit in addressing the needs of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender students and families.

It's a challenge we must accept because we know:

- More than 750,000 public school students identify as lesbian or gay.
- 90% of LGBT students are verbally harassed at school.
- More than 60% of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender students feel unsafe at school but do not report harassment or assault because they believe nothing will be done.
- Achievement, school attendance, and college aspirations are significantly lower for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender students than the general population of students (GLSEN, 2010).

We also know personal stories of LGBT students and families who continually experience the pain of being rejected by their schools and communities. For culturally proficient educators, knowing requires action. It is one thing to not act because you are unaware. It is quite another to fail to act after you know.

Our colleague's challenge is a gift to us. It's a chance for us to continue growing and to improve our work and extend its impact. It's also evidence that our efforts to make our work environment more culturally proficient are paying off. It's unlikely that a faculty colleague would have offered constructive critique of our work five years ago. But in recent years we have been purposeful in hiring faculty with an equity lens, and we have developed a collegial culture that encourages us to challenge one another in a way that causes reflection and growth. An environment such as this is essential to developing cultural proficiency. It's a journey, not a destination. And sticking with that journey is easier when you have the support of committed colleagues.

REFERENCE

GLSEN (2010). *The 2009 national school climate survey.* New York: Gay, Lesbian, Straight Educator Network. Available at www.glsen.org/cgi-bin/iowa/all/home/index.html. ■