



Guerra



Nelson

Effective diversity facilitation matches teachers' cultural knowledge with the learning experience

The effectiveness of professional development aimed at increasing cultural awareness among teachers depends on matching the needs of teachers to the appropriate approach. For the last 10 years, we have been conducting research on educators' beliefs about diversity, their level of cultural knowledge, and application of that knowledge to practice. Our findings indicate teachers have varying levels of cultural responsiveness from culturally responsive or a high level of cultural competence to none or culturally unaware. Knowing the levels teachers are at helps professional developers design effective learning experiences.

Culturally responsive educators are those who hold pluralistic beliefs about diversity, have knowledge of invisible culture, and implement culturally responsive practices. Invisible culture comprises aspects of culture such as assumptions and values that are not observable and are unconscious. They are the explanation for why we do things the way we do. When involved

in culture clashes, culturally responsive educators use their knowledge of invisible culture to identify inequitable school policies, procedures, and practice and transform them into culturally responsive components. They view the funds of knowledge that diverse students and families bring as assets that must be incorporated into schooling if access and success for diverse students are to be comparable to white, middle-class students.

In comparison, **culturally aware** educators tend to hold few and subtle deficit beliefs about diverse students and families. They have knowledge of hidden culture (aspects of culture not easily known without interaction), but are generally unaware of invisible aspects of culture. In many cases, educators in this category consider differences in culture as the source of conflict and employ culturally based practices. However, because they lack knowledge of invisible culture, educators in this category may be unable to identify cultural differences as the source of some clashes. When this

occurs, they use best practices that do not account for cultural differences.

Educators having a **general awareness of culture** tend to express deficit beliefs that are much less subtle than those held by culturally aware educators. They also tend to have little knowledge of hidden or invisible culture. They tend to apply cultural knowledge by centering on the visible aspects of culture such as food,



names, dress, language, and holidays. Educators with general awareness tend to believe students' or parents' lack of knowledge, skills, experiences, or values is the cause of clashes rather than considering differences in invisible aspects of culture. Because they do not fully understand the role culture plays, they employ generic strategies or technical solutions instead of culturally responsive practices.

Educators with **little cultural awareness** tend to hold a number of blatant deficit beliefs about diverse students and families and have only basic knowledge of visible aspects of culture. Because they are unable to identify the influence of culture in most clashes, they attribute problems to students and parents and recommend technical solutions aimed at "fixing"

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

them. Only when clashes concern the most obvious aspects of culture like language and race are they able to identify that cultural difference may be at work. Even then, they offer only simplistic solutions such as being sensitive to differences.

Culturally unaware educators express many blatant and harsh deficit beliefs (e.g. stereotypes) about diverse students and families and appear to lack even the most basic knowledge about culture and may refuse to acknowledge the legitimacy of cultural differences, believing it is the responsibility of students and families to assimilate to the culture of the school. Culturally unaware educators tend to have such entrenched deficit beliefs that change may be impossible without an experience that shatters their reality and directly confronts their biased beliefs.

Our research suggests that in an average faculty of 100, fewer than five teachers have high levels of cultural responsiveness. Most teachers are in one of the two middle groups. The fact that the majority of teachers have only general to little awareness of culture is not surprising since most are required to take only one multicultural course, if any, in their teacher preparation program. Their degree of receptiveness to diversity training may vary, but they want to be a good teacher for *all* children. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said of culturally unaware teachers, whose beliefs are so deep-seated they tend to staunchly oppose diversity training and are resistant to change.

Having knowledge of research that explains the levels of cultural responsiveness aids staff developers and other school leaders in making better choices about the type of diversity professional development individual faculty members need. A mismatch in the approach to diversity training may not only be ineffective in reframing deficit thinking and changing practice, but may also create a backlash against additional training.

WHAT TYPE OF DIVERSITY PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT IS BEST SUITED FOR EACH LEVEL?

If you're fortunate to have a **culturally responsive** teacher on staff, make her a teacher leader in diversity and further her skill development in facilitation, conflict mediation, and instructional coaching. With adequate professional development, the culturally responsive teacher can deliver individual and small-group diversity training to other faculty, facilitate book and article study groups, provide instructional coaching, and lead committee efforts to identify and transform inequitable school policies, procedures, and practices. Since her cultural responsiveness is high, she's ready to participate in professional development that openly confronts racism and other biases such as sexism and homophobia through a direct approach. While deepening her own understanding of these issues, she will develop the skills, confidence, and courage to challenge the deep-seated deficit beliefs of culturally unaware teachers.

Culturally aware teachers and those having **general to little awareness of culture** usually benefit from professional development that employs a constructivist approach. Through engaging activities and discussions that build on the existing knowledge and experience of participants, teachers in these sessions not only learn from the activities but also from each other. Because teachers start with varying levels of cultural knowledge, expect cultural responsiveness to develop at different rates. The key is to monitor progress and adjust the professional development to address their advancing knowledge. (For more information on constructivist and direct approaches to diversity training, see our June 2011 *JSD* column, "The right facilitator can help teachers make meaningful change to their instructional practice.") It is important to note teachers in these categories report being turned off by

diversity sessions that take a direct approach. Such an approach often begins with the assumption that all teachers are racist, and the aim is to get teachers to acknowledge this. Teachers with general to little awareness indicate they arrive at such sessions with good intentions, but leave feeling guilty and helpless to change. They often do not return to these sessions or other types of diversity professional development. As a result, their deficit beliefs and practice remain unchanged.

Although **culturally unaware** teachers would appear to also benefit from a constructivist approach and it would seem reasonable for them to participate in the same professional development as their colleagues having general to little awareness of culture, this is not the case. Entrenched in their deficit beliefs, culturally unaware teachers tend to sabotage training efforts, consume the trainer's time, and negatively affect the experience of others. Often expressing disdain and resistance to change efforts, they openly voice deficit beliefs about diverse students and families and attempt to counter positive views of cultural differences. Unnerved by such comments, other teachers withdraw from the conversation, which hinders their learning. A direct approach, which centers on race and addresses deficit beliefs head-on, may be the best match for culturally unaware teachers. The direct approach offers the best and most efficient option for changing entrenched deficit views. However, even the direct approach may not be enough to change the problematic beliefs and practices of culturally unaware teachers. If the direct approach fails, measures must be taken to ensure culturally unaware teachers do not remain in the classroom because they are harming students and families. ■