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Culture's influence on behavior doesn't stop at the classroom door

One of the most important concepts in cultural proficiency is understanding the extent to which culture affects every aspect of our lives. Cultural values acquired in childhood endure into adulthood and influence basic functions, including communication, thinking processes, relational styles, and even conflict resolution.

However, having this understanding is no guarantee that educators will apply this knowledge. Learning to apply the principles of cultural proficiency takes mindful practice. This is why professional development that aims to help educators become culturally proficient must occur over time and be directly linked to what educators do in practice.

Educators must have coaches or mentors who provide feedback and help them see how culture operates in their own classrooms and schools. We can illustrate this point with an example from our work with graduate students.

One of the first courses students take in our doctoral program is Team Development in Education. The purpose of this course is to help students understand interpersonal dynamics and how to develop

collaborative working relationships in schools. Students in our program tend to be diverse in terms of race, ethnicity, gender, age, and sexual orientation. One particular group had a number of students with background knowledge about cultural proficiency. Six of the 15 students attended master's programs that emphasize diversity, culture, and social justice. One student also attended a yearlong professional development program in diversity in her school district.

During the first week of the team development course, students read about team building. When asked to discuss the readings, students said they found nothing new in the material. One summarized the consensus of the group by stating, "These readings are common sense. We know how to form and facilitate teams."

The following week, when students attempted to implement the content from the readings, their ineffectiveness at doing so became painfully obvious. For example, the first step asked students to develop group norms for working collaboratively on their project. Once the first suggested norm was recorded on the board, students argued about it for 30 minutes, with

no final agreement. In fact, the student who originally recommended the norm erased it and said, "Let's forget it."

None of the students, including the six who had background knowledge about cultural proficiency, pointed out that the heart of their disagreement might be the result of different cultural values. Rather than use their cultural knowledge to understand and resolve the conflict, they did not even realize there might be a connection between the conflict and culture.

A GLARING OMISSION

In another instance, students worked on a team project in which they were expected to complete a paper consisting of three components. First, they reviewed articles and books on the doctoral experience to determine key junctures and barriers to graduation for doctoral students from diverse backgrounds. The assignment asked students to use these sources to identify strategies and structures that help students of diverse backgrounds complete doctoral programs.

During several class periods, the instructor emphasized that students should look for research that relates to the experiences of students of different

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racism, ethnicities, genders, and sexual orientations, as well as students of differing marital and parental status. Students were expected to use this information to develop and administer a survey to other students further along in the PhD program. In addition, they were asked to develop conclusions, recommendations, and an action plan with strategies, a timeline, and resources they should implement to support 100% of their cohort graduating.

When one student group presented its paper to the class, group members discussed the challenges for students of different races, ethnicities, genders, and single parents with children. However, the presentation didn't include any information about the experiences and challenges facing gay students. None of the six students with awareness of cultural proficiency noticed this glaring omission. They were unaware of the unintended but offensive message the oversight sent to gay students in the class.

Before the instructor could address the issue, a student pointed out the oversight to the class and said she felt marginalized. Not only had the presenting group overlooked this omission, so had the remaining members of the class.

One of the students who wrote the paper asked the instructor if she could submit a second version of the paper with the missing section added. Thinking she was concerned about the grade, the instructor explained that points would be deducted for the missing section. The student quickly replied, "It's not about the grade. It's about the team members we excluded."

Now that the student was aware of the problem, she understood the gravity of the mistake and the impact it made on her colleagues. After meeting with the instructor, she apologized to the students. She then let the other members of her group know that they could submit a second, more inclusive version.

THE INFLUENCE OF CULTURE

As these two examples illustrate, a couple of years of professional development in diversity isn't enough. In the years following an initial professional development program, educators need ongoing learning experiences that guide them in applying their diversity and cultural knowledge to other school business, such as leadership, supervision, and teamwork. In doing so, they will learn to recognize the influence of culture in different school functions and interactions, identify practices and policies that favor some groups over others, and begin transforming these inequities. Moreover, they will realize that values and beliefs acquired in childhood still influence their behavior and interactions as adults. Once this realization occurs, educators have internalized cultural knowledge and skills and have the proficiency to apply it to different situations. Without these ongoing learning experiences, their cultural work stops at the classroom door.

Because of the examples described here and many others like them, diversity and cultural knowledge is integrated in the team-building course, and students are guided in understanding how it shapes their own behavior and interactions with each other. Developing this understanding results in a team (and cohort) that works collaboratively, addresses and resolves conflict, is productive, and is supportive of each of its members.

BEYOND THE CLASSROOM

In our December 2011 *JSD* column ("The ability to value diversity requires extensive, ongoing learning experiences"), we said that, in addition to scrutinizing instruction and other classroom practices (e.g. behavior management, assessment, and parent involvement) for inequities, culturally proficient educators examine other policies, procedures, and practices that are often overlooked, such as job

interviews (Guerra & Nelson, 2011, pp. 59-60).

After being trained in diversity, educators tend to concentrate on classroom practice while ignoring other school business, such as leadership, human resources management, supervision, evaluation, and teamwork. This focus on classroom practice is critical due to the achievement gap and other inequities, including disproportionality in special education, discipline referrals, gifted education, and other areas.

However, once these gaps begin to narrow as a result of making instruction, curriculum and instructional resources, behavior management, and parent involvement culturally responsive, educators fail to direct their attention to other areas of the school, believing their work is done.

Unless staff developers and principals provide ongoing learning experiences to help educators recognize the influence of culture in other school business and understand how these practices, policies, and procedures favor some groups while disadvantaging others, educators with limited diversity training tend not make these connections on their own.

In our work with educators in the field and at the university, we often find that educators with only a few years of diversity training do not consider the influence of culture in interactions with their peers or other adults because they believe they all hold the same values and beliefs. Thus, when disagreements or concerns arise, blame is usually attributed to the traits of an individual rather than consider the effects culture may have on the people involved in the situation.

REFERENCE

Guerra, P. & Nelson, S. (2011, December). The ability to value diversity requires extensive, ongoing learning experiences. *JSD*, 32(6), 59-60. ■