INSIDE CULTURAL PROFICIENCY

To create schools where every student is successful, educators must address relationships, especially with students and families who have been historically disenfranchised from the educational system. To develop such relationships, educators must be culturally proficient to help them know and understand students and families from backgrounds different than their own. Two foundational premises of cultural proficiency are that cultural understanding matters and that teacher beliefs matter in improving student performance.

1 CULTURAL UNDERSTANDING

A primary function of schooling is to transmit culture. In our society, this means teaching students the democratic values of independence, equality, autonomy, initiative, and individuality so they become productive citizens. For students who acquire these cultural values at home, schooling is about learning knowledge and skills, and these values are reinforced at school. But students who come with a different value set must learn not only the academic content, but also the values or implicit rules of schooling.

For example, because white middle-class Americans value verbal prowess as evidence of initiative, assertiveness, and responsibility, students are expected to jump in to class discussions to express their thoughts. In contrast, many other cultures view this free-flowing participation as rude and believe students should wait to be recognized before responding. Without this cultural understanding, teachers may misinterpret student behavior.

When a student sits quietly during class discussions, the teacher may assume the student doesn't have anything to say or is not very bright, rather than considering the alternate explanation of cultural difference. Because the teacher believes that the problem lies within the student (deficit thinking), he or she may respond by lowering expectations for the student, reducing the curriculum rigor, or using "drill-and-kill" assignments. In turn, students become bored, disengaged, or alienated, resulting in underachievement and overreferral to discipline and special education.

Culturally proficient teachers see students for what they bring and use student knowledge and contributions as a bridge for teaching and learning. As a result, students feel valued and are engaged in learning, leading to higher achievement.

This article is an excerpt from "Cultural Proficiency," a series of columns by professors Sarah W. Nelson and Patricia L. Guerra that appeared in *JSD*. Here, Nelson and Guerra describe why learning leaders should advocate for a culturally proficient school system.

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2 TEACHER BELIEFS

Personal beliefs have a powerful influence on what we know and do. When we are exposed to new information, we unconsciously sift it through our personal beliefs to make sense of it. In doing so, we often reject or modify aspects of the information that do not fit with the beliefs we hold (Bandura, 1982). For example, when we attend professional development on a new reading program, what we take away depends heavily on our personal beliefs (Pohan, 1996). If we do not believe all children can learn, we may not implement the reading program as intended. Rather than using the critical thinking activities recommended in the teacher's guide, we might instead ask certain students to answer basic recall questions.

Few of us are even aware of our personal beliefs, which is troubling because, for many, life experiences and education have led to developing deficit beliefs about certain cultural, linguistic, and economic groups. Those who hold deficit beliefs see some students as having deficiencies (lack of intelligence, limited motivation, poor social behavior) that interfere with learning (Valencia, 1997). As a result, the focus of education becomes fixing students rather than building on their strengths and assets.

Decades of research suggests that teachers' personal beliefs about diverse students lead to differential treatment, expectations, and outcomes (Baron, Tom & Cooper, 1985; Delpit, 1996; Love & Kruger, 2005; Rist, 1970). Educators who develop cultural proficiency can examine their beliefs from a new standpoint. Because what was once unconscious is now conscious, they become mindful of how their beliefs drive their practices. By being mindful, they are able to avoid judging the behavior of students and families based on a single perspective of how things should be done.

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RESTORATIVE PRACTICES: A TOOL KIT FOR EDUCATORS

According to the International Institute for Restorative Practices, restorative practices are processes that build healthy relationships and a sense of community to prevent and address conflict and wrongdoing. In schools, restorative practices are emerging as tools used to change a disciplinary culture that too often disproportionately affects students of color. Broadly speaking, restorative practices maintain that there be a shared responsibility between teachers and students to create an environment of safety, trust, and respect — and to hold each other accountable for this.

Find more information on restorative practices in the classroom and download the guide at www.schottfoundation.org/restorative-practices.

The Schott Foundation in 2014 produced a guide for educators called *Restorative Practices: Fostering Healthy Relationships and Promoting Positive Discipline in Schools*. The foundation hopes the tool kit can illustrate how restorative practices can be "seamlessly integrated into the classroom, curriculum, and culture of schools, and how they can help transform schools to support the growth and health of all students."