THE JOURNEY TO CULTURAL PROFICIENCY IS A SIZEABLE CHALLENGE

Demographic shifts are bringing schools more diverse populations. Educators are striving to respond, but many lack the cultural proficiency to address the needs of a diverse student population.

Most educational leaders are aware that their districts have a gap in achievement among racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic groups of students but are unaware that the problem goes beyond achievement test scores. More importantly, they may not understand what steps to take to address the issue.

The first step is to assess the extent of the staff's cultural awareness. Using the tool described in the summer 2007 *JSD* (see **www.nsdc.org** for the previous column), gather data to illustrate that your district is not untouched by this pressing concern. The next step is to convince the district's leaders that staff members need professional learning experiences that will help them develop cultural proficiency.

Because few educators understand the impact of culture on teaching and learning, educators tend to respond to system inequities with technical solutions such as curriculum alignment, small-group instruction, extended learning time, learning communities, data-driven decision-making models, and school-based social services. While these aspects of school improvement are important, they do not adequately address systemic inequities. To create schools where each and every student is successful, educators must also 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. Convincing district leaders of the need to focus on relationships means helping them understand why cultural proficiency is important. Present this information in a formal professional development session for a large, hierarchical district or through informal discussions in a smaller district or one with a flatter organizational structure. Begin by describing two foundational premises: that cultural understanding matters and that teacher beliefs matter in improving student performance.

CULTURAL UNDERSTANDING MATTERS

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. These cultural values are reflected in everything we do in school, from the curricula and books we teach, to how we teach, and to who teaches (Lynch, 1992). 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, and/or alienated, resulting in underachievement and over-referral to discipline and special education.

Culturally proficient teachers understand that culture is

In each issue of *JSD*, Sarah W. Nelson, above, and Patricia L. Guerra write about the importance of and strategies for developing cultural awareness in teachers and schools. The columns are available at www.nsdc.org.

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the lens through which we see and understand the world (Garcia & Dominguez, 1997) and that cultures vary from one another in important ways, including communication style, power distribution, role expectations, and identity development (Hall, 1976; Hofstede, 2003). This broadened cultural lens allows teachers to 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.

Can you lead a cultural proficiency journey? Find out with the NSDC Tool, p. 61.

BELIEFS MATTER

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. We do not knowingly sort and select information that fits with our beliefs. In fact, few of us are even aware of our personal beliefs.

Lack of awareness about beliefs 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). These deficit beliefs can be found among educators of all races, ethnicities, and economic classes.

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.

LEADING THE JOURNEY

Taking educators on this journey to cultural proficien-cy is a sizeable challenge. Not everyone has the constitution or willingness to assume this responsibility. Diversity trainers must be comfortable addressing conflict that at times can be confrontational. Recognizing whether you would be comfortable leading this effort is important. Without a knowledgeable and skilled leader, the effort could backfire and actually make matters worse. The wise staff developer is willing to learn new skills, but is also aware when he or she may not be the best person to lead the learning.

Am I the one? To be effective, the staff development leader must have deep cultural knowledge to provide the context for exploring and understanding beliefs, facilitation skills to create a trusting and supportive environment, and conviction enough to keep going even when it would be easier to abandon the effort.

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THE JOURNEY IS CULTURAL PROFICIENCY

Can you take the lead?

A re you the one to lead your school's journey toward cultural proficiency? Use this assessment tool to find out if you have the necessary knowledge, skills, and conviction. If you do, it may be time to step up to leadership. If not, this tool suggests upgrading your skills and attitudes and ways to find someone who is ready right now.

You have KNOWLEDGE of:

• Culture-specific information.	**Yes**	**No**
• Dimensions of culture.	**Yes**	**No**
• Culture in practice, policies, and procedures.	**Yes**	**No**
• Common culture clashes in school (e.g. instruction, behavior management, parent involvement).	**Yes**	**No**
• Educator beliefs that act as barriers to teaching and learning.	**Yes**	**No**
• Alternate explanations.	**Yes**	**No**
• Mindfulness.	**Yes**	**No**
• Culturally responsive curriculum, instruction, and leadership.	**Yes**	**No**

You have the SKILLS to:

• Facilitate groups (e.g. develop group norms, mediate conflict).	**Yes**	**No**
• Develop learning communities.	**Yes**	**No**
• Build a safe environment where teachers will feel free to talk.	**Yes**	**No**
• Recognize deficit thinking/beliefs.	**Yes**	**No**
• Challenge without humiliation and deconstruct and reframe deficit beliefs.	**Yes**	**No**
• Know who and when to challenge and when to withdraw.	**Yes**	**No**
• Remain emotionally neutral in the midst of conflict.	**Yes**	**No**

• Avoid getting hooked when others challenge you (e.g. if you're white, teachers accuse you of being a racist. Or, if you're a person of color, you're told "it's your issue"); don't take remarks/messages personally. This skill is especially difficult to practice if you identify with the group being labeled as deficit (e.g. person of color and/or grew up in poverty).	**Yes**	**No**
• Identify and resolve culture clashes.	**Yes**	**No**
• Work with a partner to plan and train.	**Yes**	**No**
• Admit you make mistakes.	**Yes**	**No**
• Culture switch.	**Yes**	**No**

You have CONVICTION that:

• Each child can learn and succeed.	**Yes**	**No**
• Learning should be student-centered.	**Yes**	**No**
• Schooling should be driven by what is best for students, families, and communities.	**Yes**	**No**
• Educators are well-intentioned, caring individuals.	**Yes**	**No**
• There is no one "right" way to do things.	**Yes**	**No**
• School reform requires change in both beliefs and practice.	**Yes**	**No**
• Culturally responsive teaching benefits all students and educators.	**Yes**	**No**
• Multicultural understanding is important for all students, not just diverse students.	**Yes**	**No**
• You can persevere — you will stick with the process even when it gets difficult	**Yes**	**No**

The results:

- If you answered "yes" to all of the questions listed in this tool, then you are the one to lead this journey.

- If you answered "yes" to all of the questions under the Conviction category but were not able to answer "yes" to most of the others under the categories of Knowledge and Skills, then get more diversity training before volunteering to lead this journey.

- If you answered "no" to most of the questions on this assessment tool, especially those in the Conviction category, then look for someone in your organization who can best help your staff develop cultural proficiency. Even if you are willing and capable of leading the effort, other commitments may prevent you from giving your attention to it, in which case you must identify someone who can.

For more information
See Sarah W. Nelson and Patricia L. Guerra's column, Cultural Proficiency, on p. 59.

If not me, who?

Canvass your district to find someone who has the knowledge, skills, and conviction to lead this effort. If there is no one, you can take one of three actions:

1. Hire professional diversity trainers;
2. Identify a staff member who is willing to take on the role and then develop this individual's knowledge and skills; or
3. Implement a two-tiered staff development program that splits responsibility between trainers. The two-tiered approach starts with a depersonalized exploration of the issues to develop a readiness and desire to learn more about diversity, followed by intensive training to delve deeper into personal beliefs and professional practice. The first step can be led by you or another staff member who has some cultural awareness and knowledge and is willing to lead teachers in a discussion.

Source: Guerra, P.L. & Nelson, S.W. (2006, April). *Leadership for diverse schools: Putting tough issues on the table.* Session presented at the annual meeting of the ASCD, Chicago, IL. ■