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## Cultural proficiency means having the courage to act despite risks

Be-coming culturally proficient is a multistep process that takes time. First, one learns aspects of culture, which are not easily observed and often unconscious, such as values, beliefs, and worldviews. Next, one develops an awareness of barriers to equity, such as deficit thinking and inequitable instructional practices. Finally, one acquires cultural skills such as mindfulness, multiple perspectives, cultural responsiveness, and challenging deficit thinking.

These skills are the foundation for cultural proficiency. However, having them does not necessarily make an educator culturally proficient. A culturally proficient educator is willing to act in support of equity, diversity, and justice in the face of resistance and perceived personal risk, such as being socially ostracized by colleagues, falling out of favor with a supervisor, or even losing a job. These courageous individuals put aside their own welfare to take a stand.

This moral imperative (Fullan, 2003), or the courage to do what is right, is key to being culturally

proficient. It's easy to support equity, diversity, and justice when nothing is at risk. Cultural proficiency exists when educators are willing to give up something in support of these principles. To better understand the difference, we share an example of two educators with cultural knowledge and skills leading similar school improvement efforts, but with very different approaches.

### TWO DISTRICTS, TWO OUTCOMES

Several years ago, we provided professional development in diversity to educators in two districts whose leaders were committed to closing the achievement gap. One district was in the Midwest, the other in the Southwest. Although different in size and location, the districts had many similarities. Both were situated outside of a large urban center and experiencing rapid demographic change, shifting from a predominantly white, middle-class student body to a more racially, ethnically, and economically diverse one. Both districts also had a predominantly white, middle-class

teacher core.

The districts differed in two significant ways. From the onset of the training, teachers in the Midwest district expressed more deficit beliefs than teachers in the Southwest district. The Midwest teachers were also more resistant to the idea of changing practice to address inequities. Given this context, we considered the Southwest district more likely than the Midwest one to continue working toward cultural proficiency once the professional development ended. This was not the case.

Although the two leaders shared a desire to create culturally proficient schools, there was one distinct difference. The Midwest leader worked with a moral imperative in the face of resistance and personal risk, while the Southwest leader did not. Here is how the Midwest leader described her struggle to take a stand in support of equity and justice.

### TAKING A STAND

A 6th-grade boy in the district was found to have a note with a list



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of student names and the word “kill” at the top. According to the Midwest leader, this boy had been harassed by other students and subjected to negative comments about his clothing, his skin color, and his school performance. He was frustrated by this, and, as a coping strategy, his counselor told him to write about it. Another student found the paper and took it to the teacher.

Both the principal and the

counselor spoke with the boy and determined that he was not a threat, but they asked that he have a psychological evaluation before returning to school, which he did. An aide was placed in the classroom as a precautionary measure and to allay parent concerns.

One parent was not satisfied with this and started a petition to have the child expelled.

The parent took her petition to other schools in the district, spoke to

groups of parents, and went door-to-door to gather support for the petition. Other parents joined in, contacting radio and TV stations to get publicity for their campaign and to pressure the school board to expel the child. The Midwest leader was subjected to personal attacks. In the end, the school board didn't react to the parents' actions, and the child was allowed to remain in school. However, the controversy didn't go away.

The Midwest leader reports, “They wanted this kid gone. This kid represented everything that they didn't want happening in the schools, all the changes they didn't want. They don't want kids like him. They definitely

don't want poor black kids in their schools, and he became a symbol of that.”

When asked to explain why she was willing to fight so hard for this student, she stated, “Everybody around me, including the former superintendent, told me to ‘just cut your losses and get rid of the kid.’ But that is what everybody does. ... I didn't want them to be able to win one more time.”

Although her willingness to take a stand and be courageous was the strongest evidence that this leader works with a moral imperative, it was not the only evidence we saw while working in the district. A moral imperative was evident in all aspects of her work. She was committed to educational equity. This leader made educational equity the topic of every interaction and conveyed that becoming culturally proficient was an unquestionable goal for everyone in the district — students, teachers, and administrators.

As a result of working purposefully and relentlessly with a moral imperative, changes in support of equity, diversity, and justice began soon after our work in the district concluded. That work continues today, despite the fact that this leader has retired.

#### **GIVING IN TO FEAR**

Although teachers in the Southwest district were more open to the idea of changing practice to address inequities, this was not the case for all school leaders in the district. At the end of the first year of professional development, the leader from the Southwest district was informed that some school leaders were not supportive of efforts to make the district more culturally responsive and were actually working against the initiative.

Although he acknowledged the problem, he could not bring himself to act. He seemed to know he should act, but did not seem to have the courage to do so because he feared he would lose his job if he acted too forcefully.

Moreover, he seemed concerned with the possibility of being socially ostracized because a number of school leaders lived in the same community and attended the same church as he did.

Although he recognized the dilemma, without the urgency a moral imperative provides, he was unable to transcend his fear and take action. Consequently, the improvement initiative stalled, and the district remains entrenched in inequitable practices.

#### **HOW MORAL IMPERATIVE DEVELOPS**

When the leader from the Midwest district was asked how she developed this moral imperative, she suggested this disposition was the result of the way she was raised. This is important, but troubling, because it suggests moral imperative is something educators bring with them to practice rather than develop along the way.

How, then, do we assist educators like the leader in the Southwest district to resolve the moral dissonance that results when one knows what should be done to ensure equity for all children, but cannot bring oneself to do it? As this example illustrates, having cultural knowledge and skills is not enough to make one culturally proficient. One has to use them in relentless pursuit of equity and justice.

In our next column, we will discuss how we as staff developers teach educators to put aside concerns over their personal welfare and act with courage in support of equity, diversity, and justice instead of sitting quietly on the sidelines.

#### **REFERENCE**

**Fullan, M. (2003).** *The moral imperative of school leadership.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press. ■

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