

CULTURAL PROFICIENCY: TOOLS FOR SCHOOL LEADERS

By Kikanza Nuri-Robins, Delores B. Lindsey, Raymond D. Terrell, and Randall B. Lindsey¹

Culture shapes behaviors, values, and institutions—and everyone is influenced by norms and expectations. To provide equitable education, educators must assess their own culture and learn to manage the dynamics of difference. Four tools help educators work toward cultural proficiency by acquiring the skills and language to engage their students and their families in communities of learning.

“Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to be free.” The world has heeded this invitation on the Statue of Liberty, and the United States has learned that although creating a racially and ethnically diverse nation is laudable, the real work of an equitable and inclusive society has only begun. When equity and inclusion are viewed as problems to be solved in education and elsewhere, the result is tension laden. The goal is to see cultural proficiency as a way to understand, embrace, and talk about differences that recognizes and respects individuals and their cultures.

Educators must respond to the needs of communities that are diverse in many components of culture. Moreover, schools have been asked—in many cases, mandated—to educate specific demographic groups of students who are identified by their race, ethnicity, sex, special needs, or socioeconomic status. The accountability movement is an unprecedented challenge to school leaders, but it offers opportunities for middle level and high school administrators to work with faculty and community members to challenge prevailing notions of equity and diversity by linking them to access and inclusion in ways not envisioned by most schools and school districts before.

Changing the Conversation

Individuals and organizations are defined by their cultures, which reflect the belief systems and behaviors that are informed by race and ethnicity and other factors, such as sex, age, sexual orientation, and physical ability. Cultural proficiency is an inside-out approach that makes explicit the values and practices that enable both individuals and schools to interact effectively across cultures. Becoming culturally proficient means raising awareness of and closing the gap

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between a person's expressed values and how he or she is actually perceived and experienced by clients, colleagues, and the community.

To achieve proficiency, educators must align their values and educational philosophies with their daily practices to create learning communities among and between educators, students, and their families.

The public schools in the United States are most effective for the populations for which they were created, and as many educators lament, most current student bodies are not like the students they taught 10 years ago or whom they taught well 20 or 30 years ago. The principal's task is to help colleagues and teachers understand and accept that despite their years of exemplary work, they need additional skills and different perspectives to provide effective learning services today. Schools must change—not because they are broken, but because they are seeking to respond to demographic shifts in society that have caused major changes in the student populations and in the needs of the students' families. Schools that are trying to become culturally proficient systems are growing and maturing and adapting to their new and future environments.

Students and their families can access the best of what schools offer if educators can communicate effectively with them, understand who they are and the cultural context from which they come, and perceive and treat them with respect. This means that educators must shift their thinking from helping underachieving students and underprivileged families to meeting the needs of underserved clients.

The Tools of Cultural Proficiency

Developing cultural proficiency involves using four tools from the framework developed by Terry Cross, Barbara Bazron, Karl Dennis, and Mareasa Isaacs (1989). The Guiding Principles are the underlying values of this deceptively simple approach. The Continuum provides language for describing both healthy and counterproductive policies, practices, and individual behaviors. The Essential Elements are behavioral standards for planning and measuring growth toward cultural proficiency. The Barriers are obstacles that impede the process of developing cultural proficiency.

Guiding Principles

Diverse groups of students cannot be taught well and expected to achieve if educators do not understand and respond to the dynamics of culture in their school environment. The Guiding Principles are the core values upon which the approach is built. They can be aligned with or used to expand the values of any particular school. The Guiding Principles for culturally proficient practice are the following:

- Culture is a predominant force; it shapes behaviors, values, and institutions
- The dominant group serves people who are not members of the mainstream, in varying

degrees

- Diversity within cultures is as important as diversity among cultures; cultural groups are not monolithic
- Diverse populations have unique needs, which may not be met by the mainstream culture in which they are expected to succeed
- The dignity of individuals is not guaranteed unless the dignity of their cultures is affirmed and preserved
- Thought patterns of non-Western, non-European cultures provide different ways of viewing and solving problems, which often are ignored, unrecognized, or demeaned by members of Western cultures
- People who belong to cultures that are not part of the mainstream culture must be at least bicultural to be successful
- Multicultural affirmation enriches everyone and enhances the capacity of all.

The Continuum

The Cultural Proficiency Continuum is a conceptual framework for assessing personal and organizational progress and providing common language to describe both healthy and dysfunctional events and policies. The points along the continuum can identify the current state of a situation or practice, project a future state of development, or gauge the distance between the current and future states. The six points along the continuum are the following:

- Cultural destructiveness: eliminating other people's cultures
- Cultural incapacity: believing in the superiority of one's own culture and behaving in ways that disempower another's culture
- Cultural blindness: acting as if cultural differences do not matter or as if there are no differences among and between cultures
- Cultural precompetence: recognizing the limitations of one's knowledge and skills or an organization's practices when interacting with other cultural groups
- Cultural competence: interacting with others using the five essential elements as the standard
- Cultural proficiency: esteeming culture, interacting effectively in a variety of cultural groups, committing to continuous learning.

The Cultural Proficiency Continuum

The left column describes culturally incompetent behaviors and practices that are reactive. The goal of these behaviors is to generate tolerance and comply with mandates for educational equality. The right column describes activities and attitudes that proactively seek personal transformation to support a goal of educational equity.

<p style="text-align: center;">Reactive:</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Tolerance for</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Mandated Equality</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Proactive:</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Transformation for</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Desired Equity</p>
<p><i>Destructiveness ⇌ Incapacity ⇌ Blindness ⇌ Pre-competence ⇌ Competence ⇌ Proficiency ⇌</i></p>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focuses on “them” being problems • Tolerates, excludes, separates • Diversity is a problem to be solved • Prevent, mitigate, avoid cultural dissonance and conflict • Stakeholders expect or help others assimilate • Information added to existing policies and procedures 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focuses on “us” and “our practices” • Esteems, respects, includes • Diversity and inclusion are goals to be attained • Manage, leverage, facilitate conflict • Stakeholders adapt to meet needs of others • Existing policies, procedures, practices examined and adapted to changing environment

The Elements

The Essential Elements are aligned with cultural competence on the continuum. A culturally competent educator uses the elements as standards for individual behavior and organizational policies and practices. These elements can also be used to plan for and assess change or can serve as guidelines for culturally proficient interaction:

- Assess culture
- Value diversity
- Manage the dynamics of difference
- Adapt to diversity
- Institutionalize cultural knowledge.

Teachers and administrators have different roles that correspond to each essential element. For each element, one can identify the individual and organizational activities that are currently in practice and those that could be initiated.

The Essential Elements

Essential Element	Role of Teachers	Role of Site Administrators
Assess Culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Assess own culture and its effect on students, assess the culture of the classroom• Support students in discovering their own cultural identities	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Assess the culture of the site• Articulate the cultural expectations to all who interact there
Value Diversity	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Teach all subjects from a culturally inclusive perspective• Insist on classroom language and behaviors that value differences	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Articulate a culturally proficient vision for the site• Establish standards for holding teachers and staff accountable for the vision
Manage the Dynamics of Difference	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Use conflicts as object lessons• Teach students a variety of ways to resolve conflicts	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Provide training and support systems for conflict management• Help faculty and staff members learn to distinguish between behavioral problems and cultural differences
Adapt to Diversity	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Learn own instructional and interpersonal styles• Develop processes to enhance them so that they meet the needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Examine policies and practices for overt and unintentional discrimination• Change current practices

	of all students <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Help students understand why things are done in a particular way 	when appropriate
Institutionalize Cultural Knowledge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teach students appropriate language for asking questions about other people’s cultures and telling other people about theirs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Model and monitor schoolwide and classroom practices

Barriers

The barriers to cultural proficiency are both organizational and individual. They may be systemic, be based on values, or be tied to past experiences. There are three categories of barriers: unawareness of the need to adapt and resistance to change, presumption of entitlement and unearned privilege, and systems of oppression and privilege.

Unawareness of the need to adapt and resistance to change is evident when stakeholders do not recognize the need to make personal and organizational changes in response to the diversity. These stakeholders believe that other people and groups need to change and adapt to them. Expecting others to change and clinging to practices that no longer serve the students or their families are forms of resistance.

The presumption of entitlement and the existence of unearned privilege is another barrier that occurs when stakeholders do not recognize that members of certain groups receive more privileges because of their position or the groups to which they belong. Many students assume that their personal achievements and societal and organizational benefits are due to their personal competence or character. They also believe that they do not need to share resources with different groups. This view is sometimes shared by students’ families. Parents of the dominant or mainstream groups often resent any “entitlements” that are offered to the underserved children and their families. Faculty and staff members who welcome people from other groups only if they assimilate into the mainstream cultural norms and values exemplify this barrier as well.

Distributing power and privilege, consciously or unintentionally, only to members of mainstream groups or abusing power accrued through rules and roles within the school creates systems of oppression and privilege. Refusing to examine these oppressive systems or not taking responsibility for naming or changing them creates barriers to cultural proficiency. Systems of institutionalized racism, sexism, heterosexism, ageism, and ableism exist in most organizations. There are systems, innate to school or classroom cultures, that reward certain groups and punish or oppress others. These systems are often supported and sustained without the permission of and at times without the knowledge of the people whom they benefit.

Cultural Proficiency in Schools

Educators often look for cause-and-effect relationships between professional development and student achievement. Specific materials and prescribed instructional approaches are selected, purchased, and implemented with the expectation that they themselves will boost test scores and narrow the achievement gap. Educators are often surprised when very little changes or when scores decline and the gap widens.

Perhaps these instructional decisions are being made without looking at the data and what those data might mean for students and community members. Maybe the important question to ask before selecting programs and materials is, "If this program [e.g., professional learning communities, differentiated instruction, or a particular diversity program] is the answer, what was the question?" Another question that can guide educators in making decisions about particular materials and strategies is, "What data do we have and what conversations might we have about those data that would cause us to select a particular program or approach?"

Cultural proficiency provides a frame for data-focused conversations that help educators explore assumptions and beliefs about access, equity, inclusion, and student achievement. These conversations can help educators shift from blaming students and their cultures for their circumstances to studying how students learn and from reacting to a mandated assessment system to using assessments to create a system of moral responsibility and accountability for all students.

Adopting culturally proficient practices results in a stronger core culture that is known, supported, and sustained by all members of the community. The cultural expectations of the school are explicit and a part of the overt curriculum. Rather than punishing students and their families for not knowing how to navigate the culture of school, the school assesses and adapts strategies to better meet the needs of the current students. In this way, organizational behavior is aligned with the expressed values of the school.

Most schools have a mission statement, a vision statement, or a list of values that is framed and posted conspicuously for visitors to see, but a culturally proficient school community takes the time to translate those values into behavioral norms for all members of the community. Culturally proficient administrators ask the question, "Are we who we say we are?" If a school says that it believes that all students can learn, that value will be reflected in the master schedule, teacher assignments, resource allocation, professional development, and parent engagement opportunities. If a school declares itself to be a collaborative learning community, then administrators will ask, "Who is included in decision making?" Because data-driven decision making is viewed as a requirement and a value, the appropriate leadership question becomes, "Do the data reflect our values?"

In many schools, faculty members want to make a difference and engage more meaningfully with their students around some of the tough issues caused by differences, but faculty members don't know what to do or say. When a student has the courage to say, "That comment

objectifies and stereotypes me,” teachers are often stymied and don’t know how to respond. By learning to be culturally proficient, educators can develop skills for having the tough conversations needed to manage and respond to the dynamics of difference.

Conclusion

Culturally proficient change is systemic change, which requires that school leaders work strategically with stakeholders throughout the system. Ultimately, when schools provide what students need and educators teach students and their families how to better access all that schools offer, achievement increases for all students. As school leaders address the issues and opportunities that arise from diverse and complex school environments, they will approach diversity as an opportunity for inclusion and achievement rather than a problem to be solved.

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Culturally Proficient Conversations

1. Conversation Along the Continuum

- What is the nature of the conversations that you hear about students and their families?
- What conversations would you like to have about your students?
- What conversations would you like to hear among your students?
- What conversations would you like to have with your students?
- Categorize your answers using the cultural proficiency continuum.

2. Examine Your Barriers

- What is the nature of your privilege?
- How can you use your privilege to catalyze change in your school?
- What systemic barriers to cultural proficiency exist in your school's culture?
- Identify some of the systems of privilege and oppression in your school.
- Where is there evidence of a need to adapt to the diversity of your faculty and staff members, students, or their families?
- What resistance can you expect to a culturally proficient initiative in your school?
- How might you intervene to prevent, truncate, or redirect it?

3. Getting Started

- **Shift your thinking.** Diversity is not the problem. How you respond—or do not respond—to diversity is what becomes problematic.
- **Focus.** On diversity and inclusion.
- **Consider.** What are the needs of tomorrow? Prepare for the opportunity not the past you may long for.
- **Define goals.** Movement is not progress and progress is not excellence.
- **Identify.** What are the components in your system that are functioning well now? Start there. Help the good become excellent.

The Culturally Proficient Instructor

Cultural Proficiency is the set of values and behaviors in an individual, or the set of policies and practices in an organization, that create the appropriate mindset and approach to effectively responding to the issues caused by diversity. A culturally proficient organization interacts effectively with its employees, its clients and its community. Culturally proficient people may not know all there is to know about others who are different from them, but they know how to take advantage of teachable moments, how to ask questions without offending, and how to create an environment that is welcoming to diversity and to change. There are five essential elements of cultural proficiency.

As a culturally proficient instructor, you will:

1. **Assess culture.** You'll be aware of your own culture and the effect it may have on the people in your classroom. You'll learn about the culture of the organization and the cultures of the learners, and you'll anticipate how they will interact, conflict with, and enhance one another.
2. **Value diversity.** You'll welcome a diverse group of learners into your classroom and appreciate the challenges diversity brings. You'll share this appreciation with the learners in your class, developing a community of learning with them.
3. **Manage the dynamics of difference.** You'll recognize that conflict is a normal and natural part of life. You'll develop skills to manage conflict in effective ways. You'll also help the learners to understand that what appears to be clashes in personalities may in fact be conflicts in culture.
4. **Adapt to diversity.** You'll commit to continuously learning what is necessary to deal with the issues caused by differences. You'll enhance the substance and structure of the courses you teach so that all instruction is informed by the guiding principles of cultural proficiency.
5. **Institutionalize cultural knowledge.** You'll work to influence the culture of your organization so that its policies and practices are informed by the guiding principles of cultural proficiency. You'll also take advantage of teachable moments to share cultural knowledge about the instructors, their managers, the learners, and the communities from which they come. You'll create opportunities for these groups to learn about one another and to engage in ways that honor who they are and challenge them to be better still.

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