

A World of Difference: Respecting and Valuing Diversity

Cultural and social diversity is certainly not a new issue facing us humans. It has always existed, and we remain challenged by it. However, the burgeoning complexity of our times calls upon us as educators to face this challenge more directly to value diversity, honor it with integrity, and to preserve the cultural dignity of our students.

Lindsey, Roberts & Campbell Jones, 2005, (p. xv)

Evidence shows that high-quality teaching is the most important influence schools can have on high-quality outcomes for students with diverse learning needs. Evidence also shows that effective teaching and learning depends on the relationship between teachers and students and students' active engagement.

The student population in the United States is becoming increasingly diverse with a growing range of languages, races, cultures and values. This has resulted in a growing cultural gap between teachers and their students as they struggle to better serve students in response to demographic change.

In the fall of 2014, for the first time, the overall number of Latino, African-American, and Asian students in public K-12 classrooms surpassed the number of non-Hispanic whites. This enrollment milestone reflects not only a cultural shift but also a host of challenges for educators, including more students living in poverty, more who will require English-language instruction, and more whose life experiences will differ from those of their teachers. The greatest challenge in education is acknowledging and addressing the issue that the majority of the student population is now made up of the students whom schools historically have served least well.

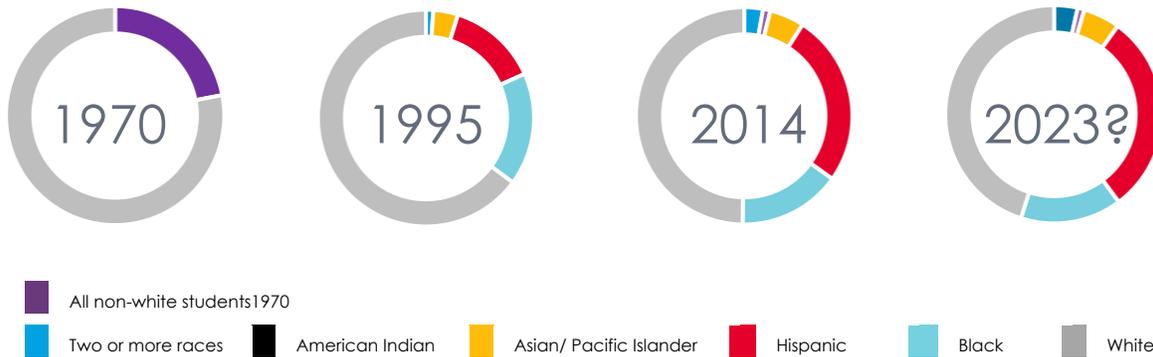
Research is beginning to link the persistent achievement gap to lack of cultural proficiency in schools. Every student brings a unique cultural background to school and every day many students struggle to navigate the conflicting cultures between home and school. Too often in schools, teachers' cultural blindness means they see the cultural differences as impediments rather than assets. As a result, many students become disengaged from their schooling and

we see this reflected in low graduation rates and low achievement among students of color (Landa 2011). Cultural proficiency is an integral component in creating a school environment that promotes equitable outcomes for every student.

At the heart of cultural proficiency are the principles of trust, respect for diversity, equity, fairness, and social justice. It reinforces and builds on the work of the last forty years as education has endeavored to challenge and address injustice, racism, exclusion and inequality through policy, awareness raising, and an inclusive curriculum. The aim of cultural proficiency is for every student to acquire a strong sense of identity, through understanding and empathy, affirmation and opportunity. Every student needs and deserves a safe, challenging, and supportive learning environment—especially students who have special needs, cultural or language differences, or live in poverty.

In becoming culturally responsive schools need to be prepared and supported to provide high-quality instruction to every student every day, including students who are English language learners (ELLs), special education students, and other historically underserved and under-represented student populations. There can be no educational excellence without educational equity. Understanding the full impact of inequities is the first step to creating

The Changing Demographics of American Schools



inclusive learning environments, supportive schools, and targeted instruction that reflects high expectations for every student.

Moving Towards Cultural Proficiency

The move for schools to become culturally proficient is ongoing and has been a slow process spanning four decades. It began in the 1970s with growing attention given to cultural awareness internationally; an initial step towards understanding difference between cultural groups. The focus was on the *recognition* of differences and similarities between cultural groups. While there was some understanding about other cultures, there was only an *emerging* awareness that catering to cultural differences in the classroom may require a change in educational practice.

In the early 1980s, there was a focus on cultural sensitivity which includes not only an awareness that diversity exists between and within cultural groups but a refusal to make value judgments against differences such as being better or worse, or right or wrong – they are simply different (Eisenbruch & Volich, 2005).

In the mid-1980s the focus shifted from cultural sensitivity to a demand for cultural competence. Cultural competence as a concept was developed in the United States as a result of the health care system seeking to improve access for the

increasing diversity of its population and to address inequities in social service delivery to Native American populations (Grote, 2008). By the mid-1990s the term cultural competency was being used widely in education; however, the impact at the classroom level on teaching practices varied greatly across the country.

In the 2002 the adoption of the No Child Left Behind Act and the need for schools and districts to report on disaggregated data once again drew attention to the staggering disparities in educational achievement between white and minority students.

By 2012 there was a renewed effort to narrow the cultural gap between teachers and an increasingly diverse student body. The Every Student Succeeds Act (2015) requires states to incorporate at least one "other indicator" into their accountability systems in addition to such traditional measures as student-test scores. There was a call for schools to be culturally responsive and for teachers to have the ability to understand, interact and communicate effectively and sensitively with people from a cultural background that is different to one's own, and to demonstrate this ability with proficiency.

Cultural proficiency is characterized by respect for culture, ongoing self-reflection, expansion of knowledge and commitment to improving practices and relationships.

Cultural Proficiency as a Continuum

While the move in education towards cultural proficiency began in the 70s with an effort to raise cultural awareness, becoming culturally proficient is a developmental process—in any given school there may be teachers at various stages of the process. Cultural proficiency was first described as a multi-stage continuum in the 1990s to give people a reference point to where they were in the process towards proficiency (Cross, T., Bazron, B., Dennis, K., & Isaacs, M. 1989).

The first three steps on the continuum (i.e. Cultural Destructiveness, Cultural Incapacity, Cultural Blindness) see cultural difference as a problem (Lindsay et al. 2007). Here teachers refer to students as underperforming.

1. Cultural destructiveness, where attitudes, policies and practices seek to eliminate cultural differences.
2. Cultural incapacity, where the teachers may acknowledge cultural difference but lack the capacity or desire to do anything to improve outcomes for minority students.
3. Cultural blindness, where the teachers operate with an underlying belief that all people are the same and culture and color make no difference.

The Changing Cultural Proficiency Continuum



As schools and teachers work to strengthen their cultural proficiency, they can reflect on their progress along a cultural proficiency continuum that indicates unique ways of seeing and responding to difference.

Continuum Adapted from Cross, T., Bazron, B., Dennis, K., & Isaacs, M. 1989.

The next three points on the continuum (Cultural Pre-Competence, Cultural Competence, Cultural Proficiency) reflect a shift from blaming the students to acknowledging the ways in which we are *failing* our students and their communities.

4. Cultural pre-competence - when teachers are aware of what they don't know about working in diverse settings and allowing for the possibility of moving in a positive, constructive direction.
5. Cultural competence - when teachers accept and respect cultural differences, continue self-assessment of cultural awareness, and pay careful attention to the dynamics of cultural differences.
6. Cultural Proficiency – making the commitment to be increasingly effective in meeting the educational needs of culturally diverse students.

It is difficult to talk about cultural proficiency without also talking about the persistent achievement gap between minority students and their peers. Equity will be a reality when students from minority racial, cultural, socio-economic, and linguistic backgrounds experience statistically similar rates of meeting high standards as do students from the majority culture.

Closing the Achievement Gap

For over 50 years the achievement gap

that separates low-income and minority students from other students has been a source of concern. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) has been testing students for forty years and has drawn attention to the substantial and significant achievement gaps. For more than a generation, from the 1970s onwards, the focus was on improving the education of poor and minority students. Not surprisingly, the gaps narrowed between 1970 and 1988. The achievement gap between African American and white students was cut in half, and the gap separating Latinos and whites declined by one-third. Over the years, however, the fundamental trends underlying them have remained consistent. The progress made in the 70s and 80s came to a halt around 1988, and during the 90s the gaps even widened slightly. From 2003 on the gap has once again begun to narrow.

While the results show that since the 1970s black and Hispanic students have made great strides in improving performance in reading and mathematics, a gap still separated them from their white peers. An analysis by the National Center for Education Statistics in 2009 and 2011 showed that black and Hispanic students trailed their white peers by an average of more than 20 test-score points on the NAEP math and reading assessments at 4th and 8th grades, a difference of about two grade levels (NCES, 2009, 2011). At the current rate of progress,

it will take another 38 years to eliminate the gap. The presence of an achievement gap is a warning that something has gone wrong in education. It is not a diagnosis but rather a symptom. Making a diagnosis requires looking past the demographic trends to the variables that research has shown to influence student learning.

There have been many state, district and school reforms advocated as ways to close the achievement gap such as reducing class size, extending the school day, providing more scheduled time for teachers to meet, and introducing new curricula. All are worthy innovations but the research repeatedly shows that reforms like these, focused on school and schedule structures, do not lead to significant student achievement gains (Hattie 2009).

To increase the achievement levels of minority and low-income students, we need to focus on what really matters—strengthening the instructional core in schools. Students need good teachers who set high standards for every student and a challenging curriculum. This is not new information—over 10 years ago in March 2004 the ASCD released the following position statement:

"The ASCD believes that all underserved populations—high-poverty students, students with special learning needs, students of different cultural backgrounds, non-native

speakers, and urban and rural students—must have access to:

1. *Innovative, engaging, and challenging course work (with academic support) that builds on the strengths of each learner and enables students to develop to their full potential;*
2. *High-quality teachers supported by ongoing professional development; and*
3. *Additional resources for strengthening schools, families, and communities.*

Adapted March 2004

The recent adoption of new, more rigorous standards has provided an opportunity for schools to reflect on the quality of their curriculum. Students are more likely to succeed when the curriculum is challenging, engaging and culturally responsive to the diversity of the students and community.

The academic quality of the curriculum is influenced not just by content but also by teacher expectations for students. Numerous studies have demonstrated that students' patterns of progress and achievement are impacted by their teacher's expectations (American Educational Research Association [AERA], 2004). Evaluations of successful schools have also found a direct connection between a culture of high expectations and student success (Kannapel & Clements, 2005).

A high-quality curriculum and high expectations for learners are insufficient on their own. Rather, they go hand in hand with creating an optimal learning environment that generates an atmosphere of trust. The social setting teachers provide is equally as important as the physical environment. Schools that value academic achievement and maintain high expectations are more likely to establish safe, inclusive learning environments. More importantly, they do this through adherence to a culture of high expectations rather than

mandates and policy decisions (Casey, 2000; Kannapel & Clements, 2005).

The quality of the classroom teacher is more important than a challenging and engaging curriculum: "the most important thing a school can do is to provide its students with good teachers" (Goldhaber, 2002, p. 52). There is a growing body of research that has found that teachers have more influence on student achievement than any other characteristic of schools (Hattie 2009). An analysis of data from the UTD Texas School Project found that high quality teachers substantially closed the achievement gap, especially for low-income elementary school students (Rivkin, Hanushek, & Kain, 2005). Effective teachers who know their students as learners provide instruction that is differentiated and flexible. Students are expected to work hard, are motivated to succeed, and are provided with an array of supports.

In schools where the teachers are culturally proficient, students' cultural backgrounds of language, race, gender, and socio-economic status are seen as strengths to build on. Cultural proficiency forms the foundation for curriculum, instruction, assessment, and leadership that values and responds to students' cultures. This belief in all students' ability to learn requires educators to be aware of how their assumptions inform their individual values and behaviors.

Through the process of critical reflection educators are better able to identify their own bias and identify hidden barriers to inclusion. It is also important to reflect on how practices, language and the curriculum may reinforce stereotypes or the dominant culture (Cave et al., 2005; Reifel and Brown, 2004). Critical reflection is an ongoing process that requires an understanding that there is no one right approach to working with students. It is therefore important that professionals look critically at their philosophy, theory and practice to ensure they are

Essential Elements of Cultural Competence

1. A valuing of cultural diversity
2. Conducting a cultural self-assessment
3. Managing the dynamics of difference
4. Acquiring and institutionalizing cultural knowledge
5. Adapting to diversity and cultural contexts

(Source: National Centre for Cultural Competence 2006)

providing the best possible support for each student. Educational practices that respond to and value cultural diversity are usually good practices for all students.

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