

## **CHAPTER 6. THE CENTRALITY OF CULTURAL COMPETENCE AND RESPONSIVENESS**

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Each of us engages the world through a lens grounded in our own experience and framed by culture and language. We rely on these lens to consciously and unconsciously navigate our interactions and reactions to the world and individuals around us and to give us perspective. As we interact and react to the world and individuals, our lenses are either sharpened by congruent models, guidance, and reinforcement, or blunted by counteracting information. These lenses, provide a semblance of order to our lives but at the same time create blinders to the vantage points of others, in as much as they see and experience the world differently. These blinders undermine our efforts as leaders, educators, and thinkers. They also undermine our efforts to engage and learn from all members of the school community, as well as from other community members. Cultural competence and cultural responsiveness, which are described in this chapter, can contribute to equity with excellence by helping you avoid, minimize, or avert these challenges in your school improvement efforts.

It is important to ground your planning and implementation efforts in the theory and practice of cultural and linguistic competence and responsiveness. For example, when school staff develop policies and implement practices that authentically and respectfully partner with children and their families in decision making, they recognize the importance of their lived experience of engaging with schools and other services and supports. When we have a shared or understood lived experience, we can use our shared knowledge and motivation as a powerful engine for ensuring that change occurs and is successful.

We see some examples of this happening when

- the phrase “*All are served here*” means a welcoming and engaging environment, where there is respect for diverse cultural backgrounds—that is a step toward cultural competence;
- the perspectives of diverse youth and families are used to inform the development of programs and services—that is a step toward authentic integration of cultural competence;
- the innate capacity of families and communities to actively support the learning and development of their children is valued—that is a step toward respect for culture and cultural proficiency;
- multilingual approaches to communication are viewed as the norm, not the exception—that is a step toward linguistic competence; and
- diverse cultural perspectives are authentically included in approaches to learning and development—that is a step toward cultural and linguistic competence.

Culture is integral to everyday life; it influences the habits, customs, values, and behaviors of individuals and groups of people. Culture is the road map that individuals figuratively and practically rely on to navigate the world and the communities in which they live. Culture is at the center of how individuals interact and react to living and engagement. How individuals perceive their needs, communicate those needs, access services to address those needs, and respond to services is impacted by culture. Consequently, for engagement, partnering, and service delivery efforts to be effective, they must be culturally competent and responsive.

Culture affects everyone—it provides us with knowledge, scripts, frameworks, and language that affect how we think, feel, and act.<sup>1</sup> Culture has been defined as an “integrated pattern of human behavior that includes thoughts, communication styles, actions, customs,

beliefs, values, and institutions of a racial, ethnic, religious or social group.”<sup>2</sup> Culture contributes to shared patterns of thinking, behaving, and meaning making among group members, and if unacknowledged, discordance between groups. Culture can support inclusion, collaboration, engagement, identity safety, equity, and justice. Alternatively, it can reinforce exclusion, prejudice, alienation, identity stress, privilege, and unfairness. Individuals, groups, and institutions embody and reinforce culture—both explicitly and implicitly. While we all have biases and limited mindsets, we can—both individually and in organizations—develop cultural competencies (or proficiencies) that include awareness, learn more about ourselves and others, and develop practices and mindsets, including self-reflection, that value and address diversity.

Cultural competence was conceptualized as the ability of individuals to learn and develop the interpersonal skills and attitudes that enable them to increase their understanding and appreciation of the rich and fluid nature of culture, and of differences and similarities within, among, and between cultures and individuals. Cultural competence, we now know, must also address the effects of intersectionality. For example, how do race and/or class and/or gender and/or sexual orientation and/or religious affiliation and/or ethnicity and/or age status and/or disability status affect perceptions and outcomes? How are individuals affected by the fact that they may be treated differently in different settings or when they have different statuses or play different roles? Think, for example, of the different experiences teachers may have when visiting a school as a parent rather than a teacher. Or think about how respected community elders may feel when they perceive a school to be treating them as lacking knowledge.

*Cultural competence* is not merely a set of tools learned at one point in time and applied repeatedly. Rather, it is a process that educators and other service providers (as well as students

and family members) must learn to adapt to each new individual encounter. Culturally competent approaches:

- recognize the cultural grounding of teachers' and service providers' views, behaviors, and methods;
- acknowledge the power of language and diverse communication styles of students and their families;
- address culturally based definitions of family networks and of showing respect;
- view family and community as critical parts of a student's support system; and
- demonstrate a willingness and ability to draw on community-based values, traditions, customs, and resources.

Cultural competence should ideally contribute to *cultural humility*, which involves self-evaluation and self-critique.<sup>3</sup> It should also contribute to *cultural reciprocity*, which involves learning from people while they learn from you.<sup>4</sup>

Linguistic competence should encompass “the capacity of an organization and its personnel to communicate effectively and convey information in a manner that is easily understood by diverse audiences,”<sup>5</sup> as well as the ability of the organization and its staff to learn from people who have other types of linguistic and social assets. When combined with cultural competence, linguistic competence can help schools avoid the harms caused by deficit approaches to individuals and “subtractive”<sup>6</sup> approaches to English language learners—such as not viewing speaking another language as a leverageable asset. Cultural and linguistic competence are more than cultural “sensitivity”; they should contribute to cultural humility, reciprocity, and responsiveness. They are demonstrated (both when applied to individuals and groups) by the capacity to (1) value diversity, (2) self-assess and/or conduct self-assessment, (3)

manage the dynamics and politics of difference in privilege, (4) acquire and institutionalize cultural knowledge, (5) adapt to diversity and the cultural contexts of the communities served, (6) be culturally responsive,<sup>7</sup> and (7) demonstrate cultural humility. Links to a tool to conduct a cultural and linguistic competence (CLC) policy assessment can be found in the back of this book.

These capacity areas span all aspects of policy making, administration, practice, and service delivery, and systematically involve students, families, and communities.<sup>8</sup> Further, schools must emphasize organizational, structural, and staff supports that promote policies, procedures, behaviors, and the acquisition of knowledge that facilitates and integrates CLC. Without these necessary supports, authentic implementation of CLC will not be realized.

### **The Cultural and Linguistic Competence (CLC) Continuum**

CLC is a “... developmental process that evolves over an extended period.”<sup>9</sup> Both individuals and organizations possess various degrees of awareness, knowledge, and skills along the CLC continuum. Therefore, CLC needs to develop concurrently in two contexts: individual and organizational. The CLC continuum has six graduated stages:<sup>10</sup>

- Cultural destructiveness—attitudes, policies, practices, and/or structures that are destructive to cultural groups (e.g., “It’s our way or the highway”)
- Cultural incapacity—lack of capacity to respond to the needs of cultural groups (e.g., inadequate or limited workforce capacity and staff who can address cultural and linguistic needs of diverse children, youth, and families)
- Cultural blindness—encourages assimilation and ignores cultural strengths (e.g., “melting pot” vs. “the salad bowl”) manifested when there is the false expectation that children, youth, and families need to adapt to the dominant culture of the

community or organization instead of the organization or service provider adapting to and integrating the cultural perspectives of the children, youth, and families to be served

- Cultural pre-competence—awareness of strengths and areas needed for growth to respond effectively with CLC (e.g., willingness to accept feedback about the quality of services and develop strategies to effectively address needs)
- Cultural competence—demonstration of an acceptance and respect for cultural difference (e.g., understanding and modeling policies and practices that incorporate the voices of diverse children, youth, and families)
- Cultural proficiency—culture is held in high esteem and used as a foundational guide for endeavors (e.g., operating under measurable standards that encompass CLC, with policies, practices, and procedure built on cultural inclusion, respect, and an appreciation for diversity)

The CLC continuum is often referred to as “the journey.”<sup>11</sup> “The journey” represents constant learning and development, recognizing that culture and cultural competence are dynamic and evolving concepts. We add one more stage: cultural humility, which involves the commitment and ability of individuals—alone and together—to understand the cultural boundedness of their own knowledge, to not jump to quick conclusions, and to “engage in self-reflection and self-critique as lifelong learners and reflective practitioners.”<sup>12</sup>

### **Practical Application of Cultural and Linguistic Competence**

CLC focuses on recognizing the real and perceived barriers that children, youth, and families experience as they engage with schools and other service systems and then developing policies and practices that reduce these barriers, while authentically and respectfully including

children and their families in decision making. CLC can be demonstrated by developing strategies that address the following needs:<sup>13</sup>

- Availability asks the question, “Do services and supports exist?”
- Accessibility relates to the ease and convenience of obtaining and using services.
- Affordability addresses the issue of cost and financial burden to families that may prevent accessibility.
- Appropriateness defines the effectiveness and quality of services to meet the specific needs of children and their families.
- Acceptability speaks to the extent to which engagement activities and service delivery models are congruent with the cultural beliefs, values, and worldview of children, youth, and their families.
- Identity safety counters institutionalized acculturation messages and involves individuals feeling that their identity is safe and respected.

Developing strategies to address CLC should be informed by data to drive effective decision making. Consider beginning by first identifying the root causes of disparities, and do so in a manner that does not merely trigger guilt and defensiveness, but instead can be used to identify gaps and needs. You may benefit from scripts and facilitation guides such as those identified in *Addressing the Root Causes of Disparities in School Discipline: An Educator’s Action Planning Guide* (found in the tools table at the back of this book).<sup>14</sup> For example, the following are questions you can pose around root causes of disparities:

- Privilege—In what way do we as individuals benefit from privilege (e.g., in terms of race, gender, sexual orientation), and to what extent do our organizational practices privilege some groups of individuals?

- Power—In what way do policy making, leadership, and management equally empower and include the voices of all members of the school community?

### **Creating Culturally Responsive Learning Environments**

Culturally and linguistically diverse students from non-dominant or marginalized groups often experience identity unsafety and disconnects between the schools' curricula and pedagogy and their own resources—their experiences, cultural capital, and needs (e.g., Gay, 2000).<sup>15</sup> These disconnects place additional cognitive and emotional demands on them in comparison to other students. They must master new content without the explicit or implicit culturally embedded knowledge that students from dominant groups benefit from and that teachers may take for granted (e.g., Clark, 2008<sup>16</sup>)—hence the importance of understanding privilege. These cultural disconnects make it harder for students to perceive themselves as successful learners.

It is imperative that school administrators, teachers, and support services personnel understand the importance of creating and maintaining learning environments that are culturally responsive so they can effectively meet the needs of a changing and diverse student population. Culturally responsive approaches understand the impact of privilege and use the cultures and experiences of racially and ethnically diverse youth as a scaffold to learning and challenge (e.g., Gay, 2000). A culturally responsive learning environment requires a shift in pedagogy to incorporate the cultural experiences and backgrounds of students into all aspects of learning and development.<sup>17</sup> Culturally responsive approaches address the individuality and cultural groundedness of learning and intentionally provide the supports so that failure is not an option for any child and all children can succeed when provided appropriate supports that address the individuality of learning.



## **Practical Approaches to Developing Culturally Responsive Learning Environments for Schools and School Personnel<sup>18</sup>**

Here are some practical suggestions for schools and school personnel who wish to increase their cultural and linguistic competence and be culturally responsive.

- Create a welcoming environment that embraces diversity, is identify safe, and is open to different perspectives.
- Identify strategies that facilitate partnerships, collaboration, and work with youth, families, and community members and community-based organizations.
- Create a professional learning community and discuss the implications of books such as *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain*, *Whistling Vivaldi*, and *Promoting Racial Literacy in Schools*.
- Address micro-aggressions preventively and in codes of conduct.
- Address status-based bullying and harassment.
- Understand perceptions about and the dynamics of power/authority.
- Understand the roots and dynamics of institutionalized racism and prejudice.
- Avoid victim blaming and approaches that ignore the effects of ecological factors, including institutionalized prejudice and inequality.
- Identify and address the effects of both privilege and discrimination.
- Respect peoples' ability to use their language of choice when it does not directly interfere with group instruction.
- Harness the positive energy of families as part of the solution instead of blaming their cultural perspectives as part of the “problem.”

- Facilitate language access (i.e., translation and interpretation services)—for staff as well as families.
- Reflect upon implicit bias and provide training and support to school personnel to address implicit bias.<sup>19</sup>
- Examine how discipline practices and enrichment opportunities disproportionately impact some groups of students.
- Utilize the knowledge and skills of family members as experts.
- Ensure guidance for parents on addressing challenging behavior is tailored, creating service approaches that will work for an individual family.
- Employ and support culturally responsive teaching, which uses culturally mediated and situated pedagogy to address emotional, motivational, interpersonal, and learning needs; build upon strengths; and create learning environments where students feel a sense of belonging, emotional and intellectual safety, and appropriate support and challenge.<sup>20</sup>
- Employ interventions that have been demonstrated as effective and culturally competent.

### **Takeaways**

- Cultural and linguistic competence and responsiveness are necessary.
- Cultural competence involves the capacity to: (1) value diversity, (2) self-assess and/or conduct self-assessment, (3) manage the dynamics and politics of difference in privilege, (4) acquire and institutionalize cultural knowledge, (5) adapt to diversity and the cultural contexts of the communities served, (6) be culturally responsive,<sup>21</sup> and (7) demonstrate cultural humility.

- It is important to identify the root causes of disparities, and to do so in a manner that does not merely trigger guilt and defensiveness.
- It is also important to create culturally responsive and identity safe learning environments.

## Notes

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1 Jacqueline J. Goodnow and Jeanette A. Lawrence, “Children and Cultural Context,” in *Handbook of Child Psychology and Developmental Science* (Wiley Online Library, 2015), doi:10.1002/9781118963418.childpsy419.

2 Terry L. Cross et al., *Towards a Culturally Competent System of Care*, vol. 1: *A Monograph on Effective Services for Minority Children Who Are Severely Emotionally Disturbed* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University, Child Development Center, 1989), ERIC number ED330171.

3 Melanie Tervalon and J. Murray Garcia, “Cultural Humility versus Cultural Competence: A Critical Distinction in Defining Physician Training Outcomes in Multicultural Education,” *Journal of Health Care for the Poor and Underserved* 9 no. 2 (1998): 117–125, 123.

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5 T. Goode and W. Jones, *Definition of Linguistic Competence*. (Washington, DC: Georgetown University, Center for Child and Human Development, 2006), <http://gucchd.georgetown.edu/72401.html>.

6 Angela Valenzuela and Brenda Rubio, *Subtractive Schooling* (John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1999); David Osher and Lenore Webb, *Adult Literacy, Learning Disabilities, and Social Context:*

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7Adapted from M. A. King, Anthony Sims, and David Osher, *How Is Cultural Competence Integrated Into Education?* (Washington, DC: Center for Effective Collaboration and Practice, American Institutes for Research, 2007); Tawara D. Goode et al., “Family-Centered, Culturally and Linguistically Competent Care: Essential Components of the Medical Home,” *Pediatric Annals* 38 (2009): 9, doi:10.3928/00904481-20090820-04.

8 NCCC, “Family-Centered, Culturally and Linguistically Competent Care.”

9 Cross et al., *Towards a Culturally Competent System of Care*; NCCC, “Family-Centered, Culturally and Linguistically Competent Care.”

10 Cross et al., *Towards a Culturally Competent System of Care*.

11 National Center for Cultural Competence, *And the Journey Continues . . . Achieving Cultural and Linguistic Competence in Systems Serving Children and Youth with Special Health Care Needs and Their Families* (Washington, DC: National Center for Cultural Competence [NCCC], Georgetown University Center for Child and Human Development, 2007),

<http://www.cdphe.state.co.us/ps/hcp/form/resources/HCPculturalcomp.pdf>; National Center for Cultural Competence, “Cultural and Linguistic Competence Policy Assessment.” Washington, DC: National Center for Cultural Competence, Georgetown University, Center for Child and Human Development, 2006), <http://www.clcpa.info/documents/CLCPA.pdf>.

12 Tervalon and Murray Garcia, “Cultural Humility versus Cultural Competence,” 117–125, 123.

13 J. Prince Inniss et al., *Serving Everyone at the Table: Strategies for Enhancing the Availability of Culturally Competent Mental Health Service—Making Children’s Mental Health*

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*Services Successful Series* (Tampa, FL: University of South Florida, College of Behavioral & Community Sciences, Louis de la Parte Florida Mental Health Institute, Department of Child and Family Studies, Research and Training Center for Children's Mental Health, 2009).

14 David Osher et al., *Addressing the Root Causes of Disparities in School Discipline: An Educator's Action Planning Guide* (Washington, DC: National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments, 2015).

15 Geneva Gay, *Culturally Responsive Teaching: Theory, Research, and Research, 2nd Edition* (New York, NY: Teachers College Press, 2010).

16 Richard E. Clark et al., "Cognitive Task Analysis," in *Handbook of Research on Educational Communications and Technology (3rd ed.)*, eds. J. M. Spector et al. (Mahwah, NJ, 2008).

17 G. Ladson-Billings, "Towards a Theory of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy," *American Educational Research Journal* 32, no. 3 (1995): 465–91.

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19 Implicit bias is a positive or negative mental attitude toward a person, thing, or groups that a person holds at an unconscious level ([http://www.ucop.edu/academic-personnel-programs/\\_files/seminars/Definitions.pdf](http://www.ucop.edu/academic-personnel-programs/_files/seminars/Definitions.pdf)). For more information about implicit bias, please see <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/>; Jeffrey S. Passel and D'Vera Cohn, "U.S. Population Projections 2005–2050" (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, 2008), <http://www.pewhispanic.org/2008/02/11/us-population-projections-2005-2050/>; and Mitchell F. Rice, "Promoting Cultural Competency in Public Administration and Public Service Delivery: Utilizing Self-Assessment Tools and Performance Measures," *Journal of Public Affairs*

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<http://bush.tamu.edu/research/workingpapers/mrice/CulturalCompetencyPaper-NASPAA1.pdf>.

20 For example, see Geneva Gay, *Culturally Responsive Teaching: Theory, Research, and Research, 2nd Edition* (New York, NY: Teachers College Press, 2010).