

# What Does It Mean To Be **CULTURALLY** **PROFICIENT?**

A suburban school in Pennsylvania prepares for an increase in English-language learners by incorporating culturally proficient instruction.

Anthony Moyer and Janice Clymer



**T**oday in the U.S., more than 4 million elementary and secondary students require language assistance, and growth of the English-language learner (ELL) population is expected to continue. In “The Impact of Experience and Coursework: Perceptions of Secondary Language Learners in the Mainstream Classroom,” Miguel Mantero and Paula McVicker reveal that by 2050 minority students will account for approximately 57 percent of the student population, largely due to the increase of Latinos and Asians. As a result, “The multilingual classroom is an American reality in the 21st century,” write Jennifer Costa and her colleagues in “The Challenge of Infusing the Teacher Education Curriculum with Scholarship on English Language Learners.” Thus, school staffs must be prepared to meet challenges that will arise because of the changing population and an increase of ELLs. School districts that are prepared to manage population changes will be able to offer more effective instruction and services and avoid difficult transition periods that affect teachers, administrators, and students and their families. Cultural proficiency will be an integral component for shaping a school environment to enable ELLs to perform optimally.



## An Increasingly Common Case

Wescosville Elementary School, a suburban school near Allentown, Pennsylvania, has experienced an increase in ELLs in recent years. While more than 25 languages are represented, with Spanish-speaking students constituting the largest portion of ELLs, district officials predict that the number of ELLs will continue to grow. Administrators and teachers work diligently to provide remediation for ELLs so they can perform at a level commensurate with their peers. Even though there has been progress, assessment data indicate that this group of students is still lagging in academic performance. Moreover, the majority of staff members are white, whose ancestors emigrated from Germany, and are unfamiliar with the diverse cultures represented by the ELLs they serve.

Haitian Creole, Arabic, Spanish, Korean, French, Japanese, and multiple Indian language dialects are just a few of the languages spoken by students at the school. One hundred of the 650 students are monitored for their English language proficiency and 40 students are identified as ELLs. There is no doubt ELLs feel different and isolated from other mainstream students due to their diverse cultural backgrounds and native languages. They lack a sense of belonging to the classrooms and school they attend, which mounting evidence suggests hinders academic progress.

In “Changes in Latino Students’ Perceptions of School Belonging over Time,” Emily Campos and her colleagues define school belonging as “the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the school social environment.” Students who lack a sense of belonging are unmotivated and nonparticipative. In *The Culturally Proficient School: An Implementation Guide for School Leaders*, Randall Lindsey, Lorraine Roberts, and Franklin Campbell Jones write that the appropriate response to this dilemma is to “seek and develop the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that demonstrate openness and authentic responsiveness to the heritage, values,

**Cultural proficiency** is a mind-set, a worldview, a way a person or an organization makes assumptions for effectively describing, responding to, and planning for issues that arise in diverse environments. For some people, cultural proficiency is a paradigm shift from viewing cultural differences as problematic to learning how to interact effectively with other cultures.

**Culturally proficient leaders** display personal values and behaviors that enable them and others to engage in effective interactions among students, educators, and the communities they serve.

**Cultural competence** is behavior that aligns with standards that move an organization or an individual toward culturally proficient interactions.

Source: *Cultural Proficiency: A Manual for School Leaders*, by Randall B. Lindsey, Kikanza Nuri Robins, and Raymond D. Terrell

and expressions of each cultural group represented in the population.” However, typical U.S. public school classrooms continue to function as they traditionally have, based on mainstream, white, Anglo-Saxon culture. As a result, many teachers are unaware of the importance of helping ELLs—who frequently feel lost, depressed, alienated, lonely, fearful, and abandoned when immersed in a class of students that caters to a culture unlike their own—develop a sense of belonging.

## Develop Staff Buy-in

As principal of Wescosville School, I worked closely with the English as a second language (ESL) teacher, Janice Clymer, to introduce the concept of cultural proficiency to the staff. Five years ago, Janice and I decided that it was time for the staff to begin embracing the cultural diversity of our student population. As a first step, we staged a multicultural fair that featured music, dance, food, and customs and traditions

that represent the varied cultures of the student population.

This annual celebration, which staff eagerly anticipate, occurs in conjunction with the school’s spring open house on a weekday evening. Students and their parents staff the informational, interactive booths set up throughout the gymnasium that represent their cultural heritage. The fair attracts hundreds of visitors and other schools in the district have begun to stage their own multicultural fair as a result. In the future, we plan to expand the fair so that it takes place throughout an entire school day and becomes more connected to the school curriculum. Students will attend programs and assemblies throughout the day, research the various cultures represented at the fair, create projects for display, and orally present their research to the student body.

In addition to the fair, we use staff meetings and employee development workshops to explain the concept of cultural proficiency. These occasions provide opportunities to teach the staff about techniques that can be used within the classroom to improve the learning environment for our culturally diverse students. For example, staff members have been trained to be sensitive to the cultural traditions and beliefs of students in their classrooms. As a result, red pens are rarely used when correcting student work because the color red symbolizes death in various Asian cultures, and teachers now avoid touching the top of students’ heads since Indian students consider the head a sacred part of the body. Janice and I continue to attend workshops and read research articles that enable us to learn more about becoming culturally proficient.

Here are other steps that we are taking toward cultural proficiency:

- Staff members learn appropriate pronunciations of student names and learn basic words in ELLs’ home languages, which encourages an inclusive school environment;
- Teachers routinely use multicultural books in their classrooms to show



students that cultural traditions of all students are recognized and accepted throughout the school year; and

- Written communication sent home from the school is translated into various languages so that family members can clearly understand relevant information.

### Parent Involvement Is Critical

Teachers alone cannot improve ELLs' achievement; parental involvement at home and at school is a critical component. That is why before ELLs enter our school or a new class, a meeting is scheduled between the classroom teacher, guidance counselor, school psychologist, instructional support teacher, ESL teacher, principal, and most important, parents. These meetings, which are pleasant and nonthreatening, serve as the initial point of contact with parents to encourage their involvement. Lois Yamauchi and her colleagues confirm in "Family Involvement in a Hawaiian Language Inclusion Program" that home environments that encourage learning, family involvement at school, and high academic expectations contribute significantly to student achievement for ELLs.

Parental input is also helpful in determining factors that create culturally proficient environments. Because the parents of ELLs often experience the same type of isolated, unwelcome feel-

ings as their children, their ideas and opinions about effective educational practices and the most suitable learning environments are crucial. Parents realize their involvement in the education process is important when schools value their input.

### Positive School Changes

There have been many changes since we have become more culturally proficient at Wescosville. Staff meetings routinely include agenda items that focus on culturally proficient practices. Also, our ESL teacher has become more involved with each classroom teacher by serving as a valued consultant who provides teachers with packets of cultural information for each ELL assigned to them. The amount of time she spends co-teaching has increased in an effort to help teachers include multicultural education in the daily curriculum.

Cooperative learning has become a common teaching strategy for all teachers since we know that it is beneficial for ELLs. Emily Campos and her colleagues write in "Changes in Latino Students' Perceptions of School Belonging over Time: Impact of Language Proficiency, Self-Perceptions, and Teacher Evaluations" that "Cooperative learning activities help to facilitate a sense of belonging in ELL students. Working with peers fosters new relationships, and, if given the chance to share and explore their own histories within the school environ-

ment, they may experience a sense of competence and acceptance."

Staff members at Wescosville now show more patience and understanding in their relationships with students and exhibit sensitivity regarding students' cultural heritage and traditions. In addition, the overall school environment is free of prejudice—Wescosville students are frequently complimented by staff members, parents, and community members for their willingness to accept all students regardless of their cultural background. ELL families who have become involved in our school as a result of our culturally proficient efforts thank us profusely. Hugs and handshakes abound after team meetings when parents and students realize our willingness to work with them to create a successful learning environment.

### An Ongoing Process

In the future, we plan to do even more to encourage family involvement at Wescosville. In addition, our ESL teacher and other staff members plan to create a community resource guide specifically designed for families of ELLs that includes listings of available school, district, and community resources. We are also encouraging our school district to employ our ESL teacher as a full-time co-teacher.

Finally, in order for teachers to ensure that students in their classrooms accept cultural and linguistic differences, they must develop a greater awareness of their own cultural heritage. The importance of developing cultural self-awareness and self-knowledge is crucial for teachers who wish to develop a multicultural classroom environment. When teachers engage in the process of cultural self-awareness, they are able to recognize personal bias and other preconceived notions that may create barriers, which prevent them from effectively teaching their culturally diverse students. Therefore, we plan to conduct various activities such as book studies and electronic discussions about cross-cultural sensitivity to help our staff become more aware of their own diversity issues.

## Cultural Proficiency Is Crucial

All schools need to focus on becoming culturally proficient because the U.S. population will continue to become more racially diverse. In order for our schools to continue to be successful, we must be able to respond to the needs of the changing student population. Each student has the right to be treated equally, and it is the responsibility of public schools to implement social justice.

Cultural proficiency benefits all involved: Students are taught in an improved learning environment where their parents will be more involved in the learning process; administrators improve the academic performance of their schools; and parents become more acclimated to the school, feel more comfortable in the school environment, and develop a sense of ownership in the school since their opinions and input can help to create positive changes.

Effective and culturally proficient

teaching eventually benefits our global society. According to Hannah Jaber's dissertation, *Personal and Professional Beliefs of Pre-service Teachers About Diversity*, schools that help children to develop both strong national identities and ethnic identities produce global citizens who function more effectively in the world community. Racism, stereotyping, and cultural bias are persistent concerns that continue to grow as countries become more diverse. Exploring issues pertaining to cultural awareness in a country that is becoming more diverse is more important than ever before, especially in the school setting, which is common to all students' lives. □

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## WEB RESOURCES

The Teacher's Corner Web site provides activities, lesson plans, and songs that are appropriate for a diverse group of students.

[www.edchange.org/multicultural/teachers.html](http://www.edchange.org/multicultural/teachers.html)

In addition to multicultural activities, lessons plans, and songs, this Web site also provides instructions for planning a multicultural fair.

[www.cloudnet.com/~edrbass/edmulticult.htm#collections](http://www.cloudnet.com/~edrbass/edmulticult.htm#collections)



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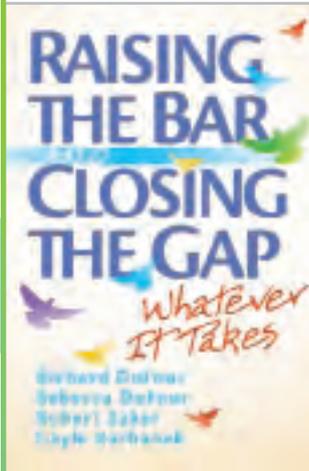
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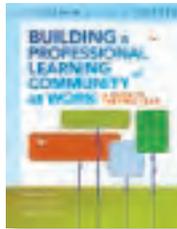
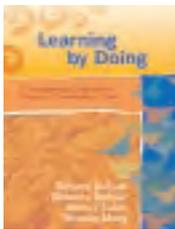


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