

Cultural Proficiency: Why ask *Why?*

Culturally proficient leaders intentionally establish diversity, equity and access to resources as priorities for their shared vision, and create action plans to achieve that vision.

As school leaders focus on change initiatives for improving student achievement, which question comes first: *What?* (the name of the new program); *How?* (the implementation process of the new program) or *Why?* (the values, assumptions and rationale for a new or different program).

Accountability measures often focus on directing schools to the “what” and “how” of addressing and reducing student achievement differences. Students’ cultural demographics have been reduced to terms such as “sub-groups” and “those students.” On the flip side, the accountability movement brought the achievement gap to the forefront of national attention.

Certainly, the “what” and “how” of education program implementation are important, but only after the “why” question has become part of leaders’ repertoire of effective approaches to school improvement.

Cultural competence and cultural proficiency provide school leaders a framework for developing inclusive perspectives that empower educators and their students. Cul-

turally proficient leaders are willing to explore the responses to the “why” questions prior to the implementation of a particular intervention or program.

Embracing community diversity

Effectively leading in today’s schools is both a major undertaking and a rewarding experience. Culturally proficient leaders embrace the diversity of their communities, knowing the rich opportunities that exist for educators and communities alike. Culturally proficient leaders intentionally establish diversity, equity and access to resources as priorities for their shared vision, and create action plans to achieve that vision.

The role of equitable instructional leadership has never been more important than it is now, in this new age of Common Core Standards and teacher effectiveness. Being instructional and systems leaders now means moving forward with shared vision and collaborative leadership focused

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on achievement for all students. This was eloquently expressed by Louis *et al.* (2010): “To date we have not found a single case of a school improving its student achievement record in the absence of talented leadership.”

Common sense tells us leaders play an important role in making schools effective by ensuring that each and every child achieves. Research has shown the effect of leadership on student learning as second only to classroom instruction. And, important to our purpose of educating students from diverse cultures to achieve high standards, effective school leaders have considerable influence on schools with the greatest academic need.

Similarly, district leadership has a positive influence on turning around low-performing schools (Williams, *et al.*, 2010; Honig, 2010). Conclusion: effective leadership matters, as it always has.

The “why” questions for school leaders

In this article we will describe culturally proficient leadership in California’s schools, and propose to strengthen the knowledge and skills of today’s leaders by emphasizing the need for school and district office leaders to ask the following “why” questions:

- ◆ Why might equity be a priority for school and district leaders?
- ◆ Why might achieving equity for all as a performance leadership skill be possible?
- ◆ Why do leaders need to know if equity and access to education are implied behaviors or embedded leadership behaviors within the district?
- ◆ Why do leaders in the district do what they do? What are the underlying values, beliefs and assumptions that guide their behaviors?
- ◆ Why are the current policies and practices in place that guide the action plans of school leaders? What are the underlying values, beliefs and assumptions embedded in those policies and practices?
- ◆ Why might these questions be helpful in guiding discussions among leaders and teachers throughout the district?

Intentionally with purpose

Knowing and caring about our students in all of their diversity is embodied in two

equally important aspects of leadership – leaders’ values and behaviors made explicit for all to see, and transparency in their schools’ policies and practices.

Schools that are becoming culturally proficient recognize that their policies and practices reflect the absence or presence of value for diversity in ways that inform daily practices in classrooms and across the campus.

Culturally proficient values, beliefs, policies and practices are intended to achieve eq-



uitable outcomes for all students. Culturally proficient leaders ask the important “why” questions and don’t get lost in the “how to” questions.

Using the questions posed above, culturally proficient leaders drill deeply and pose questions that might disturb the organization, and at the same time explore curiosity. Questions such as the following are emerging among educators who are intently addressing the underlying issues to access and achievement gaps:

- Why are students from this demographic/cultural group lagging in achievement, and have been doing so for years?
- Why are students from this demographic/cultural group over-represented in special education, and under-represented in honors and International Baccalaureate courses?
- Why are students from this demographic/cultural group suspended and expelled at rates that far exceed their proportion of the school population?

Culturally proficient leaders use such questions to understand school-based fac-

tors that might facilitate or hinder student access and achievement. Cross (1989), in his work on cultural competence and cultural proficiency, referred to this sense of openness to curiosity as an inside-out process of reflection and dialogue to guide personal and organizational change.

Leaders who take this approach are not naïve. Leaders courageous enough to pose these questions fully recognize the external realities of community socio-economics, local and national political climates, and the assessment trends that impact schools.

Culturally proficient school leaders are guided by a belief that they, just like their students, can learn. They believe their students deserve high quality education and that they and their colleagues have the capacity to learn how to educate their students.

For school districts to effectively educate students from diverse ethnic, racial and socio-economic backgrounds, leaders must use a systemic approach with a clear purpose in mind: to educate all learners. At the formal level, district- and site-level administrators hold moral leadership to be their main job. Formal leaders make explicit that non-formal leaders are valued and supported at school and classroom levels.

Becoming a culturally proficient school begins with those in formal leadership positions scrutinizing policies, practices and procedures to ensure they are aligned in ways that students and community members are afforded equitable access to all areas of the curriculum.

Leaders use the tools of cultural proficiency

Culturally proficient leaders build a systemic culture that considers all aspects of the district’s educational processes. Leaders are consistently mindful of the demographic composition of the students, staff and community, and use that information to ensure that diverse perspectives are maintained throughout the formal and informal decision-making processes of the school.

The curriculum is designed and monitored to provide relevance and rigor for all student populations. Long-range assessment processes are scrutinized to ensure that all student outcome measures are used to narrow achievement gaps and move all stu-

dents' achievement patterns to ever-higher levels. Correspondingly, district policies and practices are monitored and analyzed to ensure that disproportional representation by race, ethnicity, gender, language, ableness or social class are mitigated and eliminated over time.

One illustration is the current work of the Common Core State Standards. Viewing CCSS expectations through the lens of culturally proficient leadership practices is an illustration of approaching curriculum and instruction, assessment, leadership and professional learning in the same way.

CCSS can be the post-NCLB approach to academic learning for broader, culturally inclusive groups of students. Some school leaders have been working in this way all along; however, for other leaders doubts that many students can meet Common Core goals are becoming increasingly evident.

Theoharis (2007) reports in his study that principals who came to the field with a calling to do social justice work were able to raise student achievement, improve

school structures, build staff capacity, and strengthen school culture and community.

To lead our schools in a culturally proficient manner, education leaders must check up on their own assumptions and beliefs about who can learn high-level content and discuss it with sophisticated, academic, analytic and evidence-based language.

District office administrators and principals must consider how quality professional learning, with the lens of cultural proficiency, strengthens the likelihood of all students being college- and career-ready graduates.

The tools: A powerful leadership lesson

The tools of cultural proficiency provide educational leaders the means to respond effectively in cross-cultural environments to guide personal and organizational change. The interrelated nature of the tools allows school leaders to embrace students' cultural assets in overcoming school-based barriers to student success.

Sinek (2009) describes the relationship

among three key leadership questions: what, how and why. Each of the questions has a specific position of importance to reflective and dialogic processes:

- **What?** – This question identifies the result to be accomplished.
- **How?** – This question yields the process to attain the desired result.
- **Why?** – This question reveals your purpose; the cause for which you are working.

When we align Sinek's golden circle model with the tools of cultural proficiency, three phases emerge.

Intention cycle

Consideration of "why" questions fosters deep reflection and dialogue that guides awareness of barriers that obstruct access to educational opportunities. Recognition and acknowledgment of barriers provides opportunity to embrace inclusive core values derived from guiding principles of cultural proficiency. These guiding principles are grounded in deeply held assumptions and values for diverse cultures.

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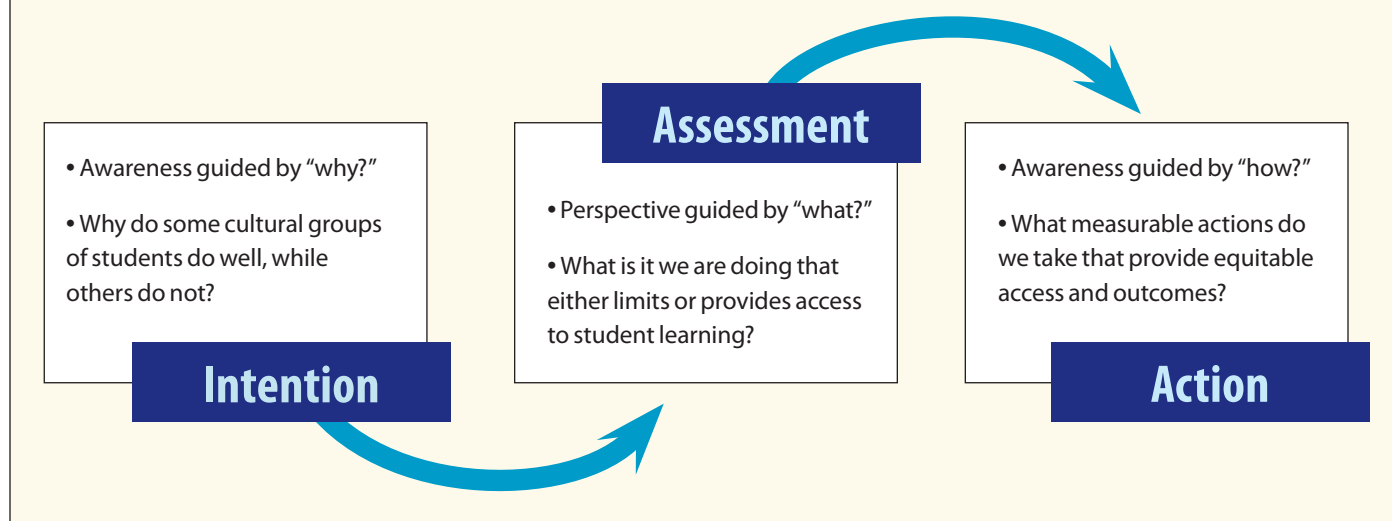
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Cycles of interrelatedness: Culturally proficient leadership



A leader must be intentional in asking “why” questions and choosing to counter the barriers with the core values of cultural proficiency. The work of equity and inclusion requires intention and focus on closing education gaps for students who have not been served well or need to be served differently.

Assessment cycle

The Continuum provides perspective gained from reflection and dialogue and provides context for addressing the “what?” question, demonstrating the mindful shift:

- **From educators’ negative values and behaviors** as well as the school’s outmoded policies and practices that hold students and their cultures responsible for under achievement;
- **To educators’ holding inclusive and constructive values and behaviors** toward all students and, at the same time, the school’s policies and practices embracing students’ cultures as assets.

Action cycle

The Essential Elements of Cultural Competence respond to the “how” question and serve as standards for developing inclusive values and behaviors and for guiding schools’ policies and practices. The new behaviors are based on new beliefs grounded in assumptions derived from accurate and informed meaningful data about cultural groups served by the school.

The chart above presents the three cycles

representing the interrelatedness of the Tools of Culturally Proficient Leadership. The barriers inform a continuum of negative behavior and policies, whereas the guiding principles as core values inform a continuum of constructive behavior and policies and give rise to the essential elements that serve as standards for assessing and planning behaviors, strategies, policies and practices.

Cycles of Interrelatedness

The three cycles should not imply that educators must begin at the first cycle and proceed in linear fashion through the other two cycles. We have learned that the educators who are successful and fully embrace cultural proficiency have committed to deep understanding of the three cycles and the interrelationship of the three.

Culturally proficient leaders use the Tools of Cultural Proficiency mindfully: The barriers describe for school leaders individual, institutional and systemic limitations and roadblocks to change. It is at this point that leaders consider the various “-isms,” and how they are present in their own values and behaviors as well as their school’s policies and practices.

Once leaders understand that like the students and their parents, they did not create conditions that foster inequity, they can more clearly see they have responsibility to recognize students’ capacity to learn and educators’ capacity to learn how to educate

the students. It is at that point that leaders consider how more inclusive core values must be developed. The Guiding Principles of Cultural Proficiency provide a template for devising these core values to inform vision and mission statements that guide policy formulation and inclusive practices throughout the school.

The Continuum provides the school leader language for identifying and overcoming the barriers of non-productive policies, practices and individual behaviors, and replacing the barriers with core values that expressly commit to socially just core values.

The Essential Elements provide school leaders with behavioral standards for measuring and planning for growth toward cultural proficiency. The Essential Elements help measure priorities established by school leaders.

For example, evidence can be collected to determine why diversity is a deeply held value of school leaders by asking: In what ways do we value difference and diversity? Another evidence-based question would be: In what ways do we adapt to diversity? If diversity and equity are not priorities, the lack of evidence will demonstrate the lack of resources and time dedicated to equitable actions.

Culturally proficient school leaders achieve excellence in partnership with all other educators in the district through engaging with and for children at risk of school

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Why ask “why?”

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failure by intentionally, emphatically, systematically, vigorously and effectively ensuring students can and will develop to their full potential.

Effective school leaders understand and recognize the importance of addressing diversity in all its cultural, linguistic and human forms as assets within the school community, rather than deficits and problems to be solved.

As a school leader, you can only care for the child when you understand what it is like to be part of that child’s culture, what it is like to be unable to speak the language of the classroom, or what it is like to go home to a shelter every night. Culturally proficient school leaders connect with students to better understand their interests and what they care about, what they do that gives them joy, and what they might wish for if they dared. We invite you to join us as we continue our journey toward culturally proficient leadership practices. ■

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