

Changing Professional Practice Requires Changing Beliefs

Educators must address underlying beliefs if we hope to significantly improve learning for culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse students.

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An abundance of research suggests that teachers' personal beliefs drive professional practice. Unfortunately, the prevalence of deficit thinking, which is the inclination to view certain groups of students as inherently flawed, is well documented in the literature on pre- and inservice teacher education (Valencia 1997). In spite of this, most school improvement efforts continue to focus on changing only the behavior of educators, rather than working on both beliefs and behaviors. We believe this is, at least in part, why 30 years of school reform have failed to significantly change educational outcomes for culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse students (CSRQ 2006; Berman, Chambliss, and Geiser 1999).

Why don't school leaders address beliefs? Could it be they ascribe to the old adage of change the behaviors and the beliefs will follow? Or could they hold many of the same deficit beliefs teachers do, believing students and families, rather than educators, should be the target of change? Or could they be aware of the deleterious effects of deficit beliefs but aren't quite sure how to approach staff about this sensitive topic?

CHANGE BEHAVIORS

If school leaders believe, like many people do, that changed behavior will result in changed beliefs, they are mistaken. Research reveals that for lasting changes in behavior to occur, beliefs and assumptions must be brought to consciousness and the deep structures supporting behaviors must be addressed (Yero 2003; Bocchino

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1993). As Shulman (1999, p. 3) points out, “The inside beliefs and understandings must come out, and only then can something outside get in. . . . The first influence on new learning is not what teachers do pedagogically but the learning that’s already inside the learner.” Thus *without* addressing the underlying deficit beliefs influencing educators’ behavior, providing “high-quality” or “research-based” professional development does little to change practice once educators return to classrooms and close their doors (Hunzicker 2004; Pohan 1996; Bocchino 1993).

WHERE DO I START?

School leaders who are aware of the need to focus on beliefs along with practice may hesitate to address this problem because they aren’t quite sure where to start or because they doubt they have sufficient cultural knowledge and skills to tackle these tough issues. Such concerns are warranted. Diversity training requires knowledgeable, strategic, and skillful implementation. One-shot workshops do little to transform deficit beliefs, and poorly implemented professional development can backfire and cause more harm than good by alienating teachers and making them resistant to the need for this type of change. For this reason, care must be taken when planning and implementing training to address teacher beliefs and develop cultural responsiveness.

Although a myriad of literature describes the behavior of different cultural groups and the need for becoming culturally responsive, there is little that explains how to do so. We suggest a six-step process that centers on transforming educator beliefs as well as their practice. Derived from our training and research in the field, we have found it to be effective with both practitioners and educational leadership students at the university.

CONDUCT A PERSONAL INVENTORY

Before beginning this journey, a school leader must ask, “Am I the one to lead this effort?” As deceptively simple as this question appears, it requires that a leader take an honest look and critically assess her own: 1) beliefs about diversity, 2) cultural knowledge, 3) facilitation skills, 4) commitment to equity, and 5) conviction and courage in the face of resistance.

Are your beliefs about diversity additive? To determine whether beliefs are additive or subtractive, consider how students from diverse backgrounds are viewed. For example, is cultural diversity seen as an asset to teaching and learning, or are some groups of children viewed as “at risk” or “disadvantaged” by their cultural and economic backgrounds? Is every child capable of learning at high levels or only those with the “right” experiences? Do all parents value education, or are some viewed as not making education a top priority? Individuals with an additive view see diversity as a rich resource that can be tapped to bridge cultural differences and maximize learning for all children. Because these individuals understand that schooling is a process of cultural transmission, they believe that every student can learn when pro-

vided with a culturally responsive education. They also believe that every parent values education and demonstrates this value in a variety of ways, ranging from regularly assisting their children with homework to working two jobs to ensure their children have a “better life” than theirs. Moreover, they believe that developing cultural understanding is not a necessity just for some, but for all students and families.

Do you have the cultural knowledge to know where you are going? Having sufficient knowledge to lead this process means understanding culture at a deep level. Although many educators are familiar with differences in the visible aspects of culture — such as customs, clothing, and language — to aide teachers in developing cultural responsiveness, the leader of this effort must understand the invisible aspects of culture. These include important aspects of cultural variance, such as thinking and communication styles, power distribution, role expectations, and identity development.

Are you comfortable leading this journey? Transforming beliefs requires that educators engage in critical reflection to understand their own cultural identity and to consider how they view cultural differ-

ences. It also requires discussing personal views with others so that the existence of multiple perspectives becomes apparent. Such discussions often are emotionally laden and can become heated. The facilitator must be skilled in leading this type of conversation so that the discussion is productive. In addition, the facilitator must not be afraid to challenge the deficit beliefs that are certain to surface in this process. At the same time, the facilitator must address those beliefs in a dignifying manner so that participants know this is a safe space to explore and reframe ideas.

Do you have the conviction to lead this journey? The goal of this process is to help educators develop the beliefs, knowledge, and skills that will allow them to transform schools so that *all* students are well served. Realizing this transformation requires that educators acknowledge and modify those aspects of the education system that have benefited some students over others. This is easier said than done. While almost everyone will agree that serving all children well is an important goal, not everyone is willing to acknowledge that the system is inequitable, particularly those who have benefited from it. Furthermore, many will actively resist efforts to change the system if it means they will no longer enjoy advantages they have long held. This is when the work of creating culturally responsive schools becomes challenging, even daunting. The leader of such efforts must be willing to continue the work when faced with resistance. The leader must have relentless conviction about the importance of this work and must be courageous when those who hold power work against such efforts.

RAISE THE ISSUE

Once a leader for this process has been identified, the next step is raising the issue with staff. One of the most effective ways to do this is by using data. Because educators’ beliefs are the lens through which all decisions about schooling are made, inequities exist in many areas at all levels of the system. Examining data that have been disaggregated by race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status (SES) makes these inequities visible. Leaders can present faculty with a wide variety of data that include information related to special education, discipline, course failures, retentions, advanced classes, gifted education, college-bound, vocational programs, and parent participation. Seeing these data helps teachers understand that the achievement gap is not created by deficiencies in students and families but by a system that serves some groups better than others. This activity can be facilitated over



“They’re reducing my class size by assigning me to a smaller room.”

several faculty meetings or on a professional development day. Before presenting the data, remove any identifiable teacher information. By masking the data, teachers will be less likely to feel attacked and more likely to engage in a productive discussion about the significance of the data.



Identify teachers who appear to empathize with students' experiences, don't express judgments about cultural differences, and want to learn more.

When the data are first presented to teachers, some teachers will validate the inequities, some will remain silent, but many others will vehemently insist the data support the perception that students and parents are the problem. At this point, it is important for the leader to remember that teachers are well-intentioned individuals who lack adequate cultural knowledge and skills to dispel their deficit beliefs and, as such, interpret data through this lens. The leader should avoid getting drawn into an angry debate. Instead, the leader should address deficit beliefs by offering alternative explanations for inequities in the data. Allowing deficit beliefs to go unaddressed may leave teachers thinking such beliefs are founded. Once a session has concluded, the leader should talk to individual teachers to hear their concerns, particularly those who did not voice their opinions. This action will go a long way in keeping the lines of communication open and in building trust with staff by demonstrating concern for their needs as well as student needs.

Once the staff is aware of inequities in the data, the leader helps them develop a vision of a culturally responsive school. Reading stories of educators who are successfully working with culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse students and parents is one strategy for accomplishing this. These books, such as *Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American*

Children, can be read individually or in small groups. After reading, the leader convenes staff to discuss the factors that contributed to success — such as the additive beliefs and practices culturally responsive teachers and schools exhibit — and assists staff in identifying assets in the school and identifying the knowledge, skills, and structures to be developed. In addition to providing evidence to counteract the beliefs that some groups of students do not want to learn or come with less ability, these success stories help staff see that a teacher does not have to be a person of color to successfully work with culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse students.

For many teachers, reading success stories will instill new hope that they, too, can be successful with students of diverse backgrounds. However, not all teachers will be as easily convinced. Some will reject these stories as an anomaly, often believing the students in the stories are “not like” the students they teach or that the schools have more resources than the school where they work. It is important to note these varied reactions because they reflect teachers' underlying beliefs. More important, they are an indication of a teacher's receptiveness to developing cultural responsiveness.

ASSESS READINESS

While every teacher needs to develop cultural responsiveness, they will not all follow the same path in doing so. Some teachers who were not previously aware of system inequities may need more time to process this idea before moving forward. Others may be eager to learn at a faster pace. One thing we have learned through our work is that you cannot force a teacher to move faster than she is willing to go. Force creates only resistance and fear, which slow the process. For this reason, assessing the readiness of teachers for more extensive learning is critical. Cultural simulations, such as *BARNGA* (Thiagarajan 1990) or *Bafá Bafá* (Shirts 1977), are an effective way to assess readiness. Designed to replicate diverse cultural groups with different expectations for behavior and the conflicts that occur as a result of misunderstanding cultural differences, these simulations can help identify which teachers are ready to pursue more exploration of cultural responsiveness. While facilitating the debriefing, ask teachers to discuss their experiences and feelings and draw parallels between the experiences of culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse students. Then listen carefully to their responses and observe their behavior. Identify teachers

who appear to empathize with students' experiences, don't express judgments about cultural differences, and want to learn more. Once this group has been identified, approach each teacher individually and encourage each one to participate in this important professional development effort.

After a group of teachers is identified, the next step is to implement differentiated training. While volunteers undergo more intensive learning experiences, the remaining staff continues activities such as those described earlier. Have staff read additional success stories and discuss them in meetings. Engage staff in cultural simulations and ongoing data analysis to build cultural awareness and to help the nonvolunteers realize the need for change. But most important, keep the issue of developing cultural responsiveness on the table to reinforce that it's not another passing fad but a lasting commitment to equity and an assurance of a high-quality education for every student.

The group of teachers going through more intensive training will play a key role in developing readiness among other staff. As the volunteers participate in learning experiences throughout the year, they will spread the word about how much they are learning and enjoying these experiences. Visible signs of increased student engagement and learning and more parent participation in volunteers' classrooms will support the effectiveness of culturally responsive practices. These side effects, combined with further readiness development for nonvolunteers, produce more volunteers for a second round of training in year two. As a result, capacity grows. By year three, the final year of training, most of the remaining teachers have developed readiness. The few who haven't find they are outnumbered by culturally responsive peers. At this point, the leader should have a frank discussion with such teachers to convey that becoming culturally responsive is nonnegotiable. They either reluctantly participate or choose to leave the school. In either case, they have little influence on others.

INCREASE KNOWLEDGE

To provide intensive learning experiences that will expand teachers' cultural knowledge, have volunteers form a learning community of no more than 40 individuals or divide them into small study groups. Use a variety of activities to help teachers explore their own cultural identity and that of students and families in the community. Through this process of exploration, teachers learn that culture includes hidden aspects, such as values, beliefs, norms, role definitions, com-

munication styles, and worldviews, that influence instruction and classroom decisions, students' learning patterns and behavior, and teacher interactions with students and parents. Furthermore, they learn that children whose cultural orientations match the one that is rewarded in school (i.e., independence, individual identity, competition) experience more aca-

Teachers must rethink practices they once thought were color-blind and equitable.

ademic success than those with different cultural orientations (i.e., interdependence, group identity, group success). Lack of understanding of these differences by educators often leads to negative consequences for students, including disproportionate representation in special education, overreferral to discipline, underrepresentation in advanced academic and gifted programs, and high retention and dropout rates.

After several sessions, a safe environment will be created in which teachers feel they can talk frankly without fear of repercussions. Since developing trust among teachers at this step is a priority, the discussion must remain focused on depersonalized practice in order to prevent teachers from feeling attacked and shutting down. When deficit beliefs do surface, leaders must avoid being confrontational with teachers, address these beliefs as stereotypes, and reframe them using the cultural knowledge and insights gained from the activities.

CHALLENGE AND REFRAME BELIEFS, CHANGE PRACTICE

Once teachers have developed adequate cultural knowledge and trust has been established, teachers will be ready to explore their personal data. Disaggregate the data not only by student ethnicity and SES but also by teacher and program. Gather and examine survey and interview data focused on building relationships with students and parents.

When the discussion is focused on inequities in their personal practice, teachers' deficit beliefs will surface. Faced with this cognitive dissonance, teachers must rethink practices they once thought were color-blind and equitable. While some will accept responsibility and express guilt over "harming" children, many others will counter with deficit beliefs. As

each belief is expressed, the deep structures underlying it are examined, deconstructed, and reframed using knowledge on cultural variation. For example, rather than believing certain groups of parents “don’t value education” when they fail to attend meetings, teachers are asked to describe parents’ behavior in these situations, consider alternative explanations, and verify conclusions with parents, students, or a cultural mediator. Using this approach, teachers discover that *all* parents value education but that other reasons prevent their attendance at these meetings, such as having different role expectations for parent participation or simply lacking transportation. After examining personal practice and reframing deficit beliefs, teachers are ready to learn how to change their practice to become more culturally responsive. The leader should guide teachers in exploring how they can apply culturally responsive strategies gleaned from the readings.

BUILD CAPACITY AND A CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE SCHOOL

Once a core group of teachers has been through this process, build capacity within the school by providing professional development for another group of volunteers, continue to develop further readiness among the staff yet to be trained, and appoint teachers from the first cycle of training to serve in key roles on school improvement committees. In these roles, teachers apply their newly acquired cultural lens to school policies and procedures to identify bias that once went unnoticed and work with school leaders to transform inequities into culturally responsive practices. Teachers can examine discipline and grading policies, curriculum and instructional resources, assessment and referral procedures for special and gifted education, student counseling practices, parent involvement programs, extracurricular activities, college and vocational programs, and teacher hiring practices.

After three years of this work, schools will see evidence of transformed classrooms. Teachers learn that transforming deficit beliefs into a cultural lens and changing subtractive practices to additive ones will not only promote effective communication with students and parents, but also will lead to engaged student learning and higher achievement, as well as to parents and a community who feel welcomed by the school and who strongly support it. Once this occurs, do not stop the work. Transforming beliefs and practices is an ongoing journey, not a destination. **■**

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