Valuing Diversity

A Well-Intended But Empty Promise

Patricia L. Guerra

Introduction

When professional development in diversity is provided to educators in the field, it usually targets classroom practice with the intent of closing the achievement gap. These efforts are critical. But work should not stop there because culture underlies every policy, practice, and procedure in the school and influences every thought, interaction, and behavior of the individuals working within an organization.

One such area is the interview process. Educators generally believe hiring practices are equitable if hiring practices comply with Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) policies and procedures. Though well-intended, these guidelines center on visible aspects of culture (i.e., race/ethnicity, gender, disability) while failing to recognize deep underlying differences responsible for day-to-day clashes in the workplace among individuals of different cultural backgrounds (Cusher & Brislin, 1996).

Comprised of values, expectations, and assumptions, these differences or invisible aspects of culture influence thinking, relating, communicating, and other actions (Cusher & Brislin, 1996; Hall, 1989; Hofesteade, 1997, 2001; Triandis, 1995; Trumbull, Rothstein, Quiroz, & Greenfield, 2001), including during an interview (Jensen, 2005; June, 2010).

When educators of different cultural backgrounds have their own set of rules for appropriate interview behavior and are unaware that these expectations influence their thoughts and interactions, misunderstandings and conflict result (Brislin, 1999; Jensen, 2005), as illustrated in the example that follows. In all cases pseudonyms have been used to respect the privacy of the institutions and educators discussed in this article.

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The Context

Travis Elementary School[1] is located in a suburban neighborhood in central Texas. Like other schools in the nation, it is experiencing a shift in student demographics. Once predominantly White, now 30% of the student body is of color. The faculty, however, remains mostly White at 90%.

Due to the increasing diversity at the school, at the start of a recent year the faculty received two days of diversity training, which concluded with the faculty making a commitment to value diversity. Several weeks later, a position for a technology teacher opened at the school and 35 people applied. A search committee, consisting of four teachers, was formed and chaired by the principal, and screening of applications began.

After interviewing six applicants, the search committee was reconvened to discuss the interviews which resulted in the narrowing of the pool to two candidates in their early thirties. One applicant, Ms. Peters, was originally from the Midwest and was a recent graduate with a Ph.D. in instructional technology. The other, Ms. Garcia, was from a city along the Texas-Mexico border. She, too, had just graduated in the same field, but with a master's degree. Discussion of the two candidates had been ongoing for about 30 minutes when the principal, eager to conclude the meeting, asked, "Who is your top choice for the position?"

The Choice

"We want to hire Ms. Peters because she's a better fit," replied members of the search committee.

"What do you mean she's a better fit?" asked the principal.

After a long pause, one committee member announced, "We're more comfortable with her because she's like us." Others listening to the discussion nodded in agreement.

These responses were disconcerting because immediately prior to the interviews the search committee was adamant about hiring a K-12 educator with a graduate degree in instructional technology, strong instructional and interpersonal skills, and most importantly, grant writing experience. Even more disturbing was the fact that Ms. Garcia, the other applicant, met all five criteria. She had been awarded several technology grants and came with references that lauded her leadership, teaching, technology skills, and ability to effectively work with others.

Ms. Peters had excellent references commending her extensive knowledge of technology, service as a university teaching assistant, strong communication, research and writing skills, and a publication record. However, Ms. Peters had no public school experience, no grant writing skills, nor any grant awards.

Rather than determine the best-qualified individual for the position by evaluating each applicants' education, knowledge, and experiences against the job requisites, committee members seemed to be making this decision on an unstated but commonly understood principle of likeness, not diversity. In other words, in their eyes, Ms. Peters was right for the job because she looked, acted, and responded like them and Ms. Garcia did not.

Despite their recent commitment to value diversity, apparently the committee members viewed Ms. Garcia's interactions as deficits or barriers to overcome (Valencia, 1997), which in their eyes made her too different to be a member of their team.

"No Qualified Minorities"

For the last 25 years, I have served on hundreds of search committees in schools and other educational organizations because I have been one of only a handful

of professionals of color working at each of these places, and thus I count twice, meaning by Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) categories, I am female and "minority."

Serving on these committees, I have experienced countless situations in which well-intentioned educators committed to value diversity inadvertently preserve the status quo due to their lack of cultural understanding. Unaware of the influence of invisible culture on routine practices, as in the job interview just described, they were unable to recognize, address, and resolve culture clashes in order to value diversity. As a result, a number of competent applicants of color have been overlooked and committees concluded the search process often complaining about how "difficult it is to find qualified minorities to hire."

Influence of Culture

Culture influences how we think, communicate, relate to each other, and so much more (Cusher & Brislin, 1996; Hall, 1989; Hofesteade, 1997; Triandis, 1997; Trumbull, et al., 2001). Nothing in the workplace is culturally neutral, especially not a job interview (Jensen, 2005; Leri, 2009; Thompson, 2009). Although the concept of a job interview can be found across cultures, expectations for interviews often differ (Leri, 2009).

For example, while it is illegal to ask about a person's age and marital status in the U.S., this is not the case in Japan. In Mexico, credentials and expertise are important but they are not enough to get a job. Just as essential is the quality of a person's character. Is a person *buena gente* ("good people")? Warmth, genuineness, excellent manners, and the ability to maintain close relationships over a lifetime with friends and immediate and extended family are not only expected but also assessed during the interview process. While these social and moral qualities may be desirable, they are usually not required when applying for a position in the U.S., except perhaps in the service industry. Instead, priority is placed on job expertise and achievements.

Aspects of invisible culture, also known as the dimensions of culture, include individualism/collectivism (Triandis, 1995; Hofestede, 1997, 2001), low-high context communication, (Hall, 1989), and low-power distance (Gudykunst & Kim, 2003; Hofestede, 1997). In a culture of individualism, which is the orientation most valued and reinforced in the U.S. workplace and generally associated with middle and upper class White families, individuals are loosely tied (Gudykunst & Kim, 2003; Hofesteade, 1997; Triandis, 1995; Trumbull, et al., 2001). Everyone is expected to look after one's self and their nuclear family.

Individual identity, independence, personal responsibility, achievement, autonomy, equality, and self-actualization are all highly valued. Since individualists tend to compartmentalize their relationships, work, and many aspects of their daily lives, they require more detailed background information to communicate with each other (Gudykunst & Kim, 2003, Hofestede, 1997). Because family, friends, and co-workers do not regularly socialize with each other, experiences are not commonly shared.

Thus, messages conveyed in this low-context communication style are in the words expressed and not in the context (Hall, 1989). Communication tends to be direct, explicit, focused on getting the point across, factual, precise, brief, and emotionally neutral (i.e., stable inflection, minimal use of body language and silence).

Socialized during childhood to having a unique identity, individualists think in terms of "I" and communicate using "I" statements (Hofestede, 1997). Since power is perceived as being distributed equally among people (i.e., low-power distance), individualists tend to believe inequalities in power should be minimized, that equal opportunity exists for anyone to be successful. Thus power based on expertise and influence is honored, authority is earned, and less delineation exists between superiors and subordinates so subordinates expect to be consulted (Hofestede, 1997, 2001).

Collectivistic Cultures

Due to increasing diversity, not all pre- and in-service educators share the value orientations of individualism, low-context communication and low-power distance. Many individuals and previous generations of their families come from collectivistic cultures, in which people are integrated into extended cohesive groups where protection is provided in exchange for loyalty to the group (Crouch, 2004; Hofestede, 1997, 2001; Trumbull, et al., 2001).

In fact, the vast majority of cultures in the world highly value group identity (Hofestede, 1997), interdependence, shared responsibility, group goals and success, belongingness, harmony, and cooperation over individualism (Crouch, 2004; Hofestede, 1997, 2001; Trumbull, et al., 2001). Since collectivists tend to have close, personal networks of family and friends that have known each other for years and share many of the same experiences, they do not require as much in-depth background information when communicating with one another (Gudykunst & Kim, 2003; Hofesteade, 1997). Messages conveyed in this high context communication style are not only in the words expressed, but also in shared experiences or the context that tells them what to do (Jensen, 2005) and nonverbal communication (Hall, 1989).

Collectivists spend a great amount of time together and constantly depend on each other and, as a result, respecting each other's feelings becomes the priority (Hofestede, 1997). Communication tends to be indirect, implicit, focused on feelings, relationships, and preserving harmony, ambiguous, emotional (i.e., inflection fluctuates, use of body language and silence), and longer or shorter, with information that may not appear to link to the topic at hand (Hall, 1989).

Socialized as a member of an extended family (i.e., group), early on collectivists learn to think in terms of "we'" and communicate using "we" statements (Hofestede, 1997). With regard to power, collectivists tend to believe it is distributed unequally (i.e., high power), that power differences are a part of life and to be expected, and that less powerful people are dependent on more powerful ones. Power based on status and privilege is honored, with clear delineation existing between superiors and subordinates, and with subordinates expecting to be told what to do (Hofestede, 1997, 2001).

The influence of these dimensions of culture is not limited solely to the interview process but is evident in other practices across the school. Knowledge of invisible aspects of culture is essential for educators to recognize and understand in order to effectively work with diversity (Gudyknunst & Kim, 2003; Hofesteade, 1997, 2001; Jensen, 2005) and thereby value it.

Returning to the interviews let us consider how these invisible aspects of culture might account for the differences between Ms. Peters and Ms. Garcia's interactions leading to the conclusion of the search committee that Ms. Peters was a "better fit."

Ms. Peter's Interview

When the division director introduced Ms. Peters to the search committee, Ms. Peters looked each member in the eye, extended her hand, and while calling each member by first name said, "Hello, I'm Su-

san. It's nice to meet you." As Ms. Peters was directed to take the empty seat at the head of the table, she said, "Yes, I'm very familiar with the hot seat," which made everyone laugh and eased tension in the room.

After engaging in a few minutes of small talk, the director asked if she was ready to start. She replied "yes" and turned her attention to the group. As interview questions were posed, Ms. Peters answered each one directly and concisely while maintaining eye contact with the individual asking the question and glancing at other committee members from time to time. In requesting clarification on an interview question, Ms. Peters addressed the director by first name.

When asked to name her strengths, Ms. Peters forthrightly discussed four or five in detail and supported them with her achievements. For example, she stated, "My strongest strength is initiative. When I was a member of a team of grad students given a departmental problem to address, I conceptualized the solution and action plan and I led the team in its implementation."

In closing the interview, the director asked Ms. Peters if she had any questions about the position and in response, Ms. Peters asked several questions. After the interview concluded, Ms. Peters thanked each committee member, shook each one's hand and left. Within an hour after she departed, committee members received an email thanking them for the interview.

Ms. Garcia's Interview

After being introduced to the committee by the director, Ms. Garcia acknowledged the search committee with "Hello," and quietly took the seat to which she was directed. She then turned her full attention to the director ready for the interview to start. When the director asked if she had any trouble finding the school and if she would like a bottle of water, she replied, "No madam" to both questions.

As each interview question was asked, Ms. Garcia made eye contact with the individual posing the question, but immediately turned her attention back to the director while responding. Her responses were circuitous, often seemingly irrelevant, and lengthy except when asked to identify her strengths. When this question was posed, Ms. Garcia paused for what seemed like a long time and then named only one strength, "technology." When asked to elaborate upon this response, she appeared reluctant to do so. When she did answer, she stated, "We wrote and won this grant where we implemented an after school technology program for students and their families."

Like Ms. Peters, Ms. Garcia asked for clarification on a question but addressed the chair by "Dr. Stevens." When the director asked if she had any questions with regard to the position, she replied, "No madam." At the conclusion of the interview, Ms. Garcia thanked the director, smiled and nodded goodbye to the group, then left the room.

Comparing Approaches

Likely coming from a culture of individualism where individual identity, achievement, equality, and explicit communication are highly valued, Ms. Peters strived to stand out in the interview. She "sells herself" by articulating her extensive knowledge of technology and highlighting her many strengths. Although she was a member of a team of students who worked collaboratively to resolve a departmental problem, she highlights only her accomplishments using "I" statements.

Since Ms. Peters believes each committee member will have input into the hiring decision, she connects personally with each one by using first names, shaking hands, maintaining direct eye contact, chatting, making members laugh and sending a personal email of thanks. More importantly, her explicit communication style matches that of the committee's. Each answer is precise, brief, and to the point. Since committee members have to infer little, her communication is easily understood. Finally, coming from similar cultural backgrounds, Ms. Peters and the search committee members share similar expectations for interviewing, which are the ones valued and reinforced in the workplace.

Likely coming from a culture that highly values group identity and success, unequal distribution of power, and implicit communication, Ms. Garcia strives to fit in. She is reluctant to discuss her strengths and accomplishments because she believes focusing on individual success divides rather than unites staff. When pressed to elaborate on her response of "technology", she is brief and discusses the accomplishment as a group effort using the word "we" even though she was the sole author of the grant and implemented the after-school technology program herself.

She always focuses her attention on the principal when responding, as a sign of respect for the principal's position of authority and because she assumes that as the person in the position of authority, the principal will be making the hiring decision. Most importantly, Ms. Garcia's communication style is different. She relies on context and nonverbal communication as well as the words expressed to convey her messages, which means committee members must infer meaning. Unfamiliar with this communication style, they may struggle to follow its indirect and detailed (or brief) nature and often end up confused.

Finally, coming from different cultural backgrounds, Ms. Garcia and the search committee members have different expectations for interviewing. Unaware of the set of value orientations (i.e., collectivism, high context communication, high power distance) underlying Ms. Garcia's interactions, committee members are quick to judge her differences as deficits (e.g., "rude," "rambles," "not very bright") and consequently conclude she is "not right" for the team and the job (Jensen, 2005; June, 2010; Valencia, 1997).

Discussion

Currently, 36% percent of the U.S. population is of color (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). Given present immigration and birth rates, this figure is expected to rise to a little over 47% by the year 2050 (Day, n.d) with Hispanics comprising the largest segment at about 40% (Hodgkinson, 2002). As a result of this demographic shift in the population and alternate routes of educator preparation available, more persons of color are entering the field of education than previously predicted (Feistritzer, Griffin, & Linnajarvi, 2011).

While 87% of the teachers coming from traditional preparation programs are White, 30% coming from alternative preparation programs are of color, with Hispanics and races other than Black the fastest growing groups. As a result of this increasing diversity, not all current (and future) educators hold the value orientations of individualism, low-context communication, and low-power distance. Numerous families have emigrated from parts of the world having a different set of value orientations that include collectivism, high-context communication, and high-power distance.

Many within this new population, if not already employed, are about to enter the workforce and some will apply at schools and districts across the country. They will have the necessary qualifications, knowledge, and skills to become educators and role models of color in a field that currently has very few (Feistritzer, et al., 2011).

But unless search committees comprised of educators receive ongoing pro-

fessional development to augment their knowledge of invisible culture, Ms. Garcia and others like her are not likely to be hired (Jensen, 2005), thereby making educators' commitment to value diversity another well-intended, but empty, promise that perpetuates inequities for some groups while privileging others (June, 2010; Savini 2010).

The differences between these two sets of value orientations have significant ramifications for effectively working with diversity, not only within the interview process but also related to other administrative practices, including recruitment, retention, supervision, and evaluation of educators (Leri, 2009). If Ms. Garcia and others like her are fortunate enough to get hired, they are not likely to remain long in schools staffed by culturally unaware educators who view such cultural differences as barriers that must be overcome.

Without the development of deep cultural knowledge, these inequities will continue to go undetected by educators operating with an ethnocentric lens. Consequently, ongoing professional development is essential and should be provided to all staff. Once educators have developed a diverse lens and can begin to transform classroom practice, they should be encouraged to examine administrative policies, procedures, and practices and undertake a systematic review and analysis of each.

To initiate this process, data should be examined for inequitable patterns. For example, human resources data over the last few years should be examined and disaggregated by race/ethnicity/gender/disability and other categories for each of the areas of recruitment, staffing, and retention. When patterns are found, educators should examine and analyze policies, procedures, and practices for invisible aspects of culture to determine ways in which these guidelines and actions privilege some groups over others.

Additionally, as cultural artifacts, job postings, application and reference forms, and interview guides, etc. should not be overlooked but undergo the same review process. Now cognizant of invisible aspects of culture in the workplace, educators should collaboratively begin to transform practices as well as policies and procedures. After this review process is repeatedly conducted and their diverse lens becomes second nature, educators will no longer require extensive encouragement, facilitation, and support in detecting inequities because what was once hidden will become obvious.

Conclusion

The search committee at Travis Elementary School did not get the opportunity to offer either candidate the technology position. While the principal was in the process of checking references, both women accepted positions at other educational organizations. Ms. Peters was hired as an associate professor in instructional technology at a major university and Ms. Garcia accepted a position at the university from which she graduated. Impressed with Ms. Garcia's character, technical knowledge, and work as a master's student, the university created a technology outreach/grant writing position specifically designed for her.

Ironically a few years later, members of the search committee encountered Ms. Garcia again in her outreach role and worked closely with her. When asked what they thought of her, they quickly replied, "She's wonderful! She is warm, friendly, easy to work with, and her exceptional instruction makes teaching with technology easy to learn."

The moral of this story is that educators should not be so quick to judge differences among people as deficits. To effectively work with diversity and thereby value it, differences must be viewed as assets to explore, understand, and incorporate into all aspects of the workplace. Hiring more educators of color will of course provide needed role models for students of color, but more importantly it will bring multiple ways of knowing and doing to the complex act of teaching and leading schools, which may ultimately help to close the achievement gap.

One final note, the intent of this article is not to stereotype educators but rather provide a place where conversations about invisible differences can begin, with the understanding that not all educators of the same cultural background share similar value orientations. The only way you ever really know someone is to get to know the individual, like the search committee eventually did with Ms. Garcia. But because these invisible aspects of culture are often misunderstood and can result in deficit thinking about educators of color, it is critical to highlight and understand their influence in order for inequitable practices, policies, and procedures to be revealed, addressed and transformed.

Note

[1] All names of schools and individuals are pseudonyms to protect the privacy of study participants.

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