

# & teacher student perspectives on cultural proficiency

This study underscores how important it is to understand students' backgrounds and the kinds of support their families provide.

**C**losing the achievement gap is a multi-faceted task. One important facet is using cultural proficiency – the ability of an educator from one cultural background to effectively teach, interact and connect with students of a different cultural background (Gay, 2000; Terrell & Lindsey, 2009) – as a tool.

School leaders who are able to utilize and build cultural proficiency in their schools improve parents' and students' sense of belonging and thus the academic success of students (Gay, 2000; Noguera, 2003; Terrell & Lindsey, 2009). And one of the most significant keys of cultural proficiency is leading a change of perceptions about working-class, ethnic-minority parents as parents who value and support their children's education.

Educational leaders and teachers who perceive their students' homes as a support to the school create culturally proficient schools. Culturally proficient schools pro-

vide a sense of belonging to all students and parents, which translates into increased academic achievement. Thus, educational leaders who can transform their own and teachers' perceptions of their school community and parents will increase the students' academic performance.

As educational leaders, we must first change our own perceptions of the parents and the families in our school communities in an effort to connect with them, rather than insist they conform to our preconceived notions of how parents should demonstrate their support of our schools.

## **The study**

An examination of cultural proficiency was conducted at three comprehensive public high schools in the greater Los Angeles area using the responses from 195 teachers and 532 students to identify indicators of

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cultural proficiency based on teacher and student perspectives. The primarily Latino student population is taught by a principally white teacher population whose parents have a higher education level than the parents of the students. Therefore, recognizing race and parent education level as indicators of culture (Aries & Seider, 2005), each of the two groups – the students and teachers – bring differing cultural backgrounds to school.

This study yielded the following key findings:

- In general, the teachers do not perceive students' homes to support school; however, the students in general do feel that their parents support their success in school.

- The teachers who do perceive students' homes as a support also find their schools to be culturally proficient.

Overall, white respondents rate teachers as culturally proficient. The white students express that the overwhelmingly white teacher population understands cultural diversity. Assuming that the white teachers and students come from the same cultural backgrounds, then this assumption is validated in that the white teachers are able to connect with students of their same culture.

Latino respondents, particularly the Latino teachers, find their schools and their teacher colleagues not to be culturally proficient. Several Latino teachers reflect that in professional conversations with their colleagues they have found many teachers do not understand the needs of the Latino students and community.

Despite the discrepancy in how students of certain cultural backgrounds view their teachers' values, more important to students is not the race, social class or educational background of their teachers, but how they perceive their teachers value and respect their parents and community.

One student stresses how having teachers who through their words and actions value the students' parents and homes creates a healthier learning environment:

"I think it is important for teachers to understand our home lives so they have a better understanding of us. It is often times easier for teachers to interact, help and even teach students when they understand

them. It is easier for almost anyone to just be around people they know more about and understand."

Conversely, two specific examples given by students highlight the perceived cultural slights students receive from well-intentioned teachers who are unaware of how their actions are being interpreted:

"For example there is a white teacher she/he will act good or pay more attention

students and build upon that support in the classroom.

One teacher writes, "Understanding a culture can help you relate to students and their families. Once you reach out to them through their culture, they are more likely to be more positive and supportive to you and your profession."

Another teacher articulates that an effective educator does not view the home culture



to their same race...She leaves out the Latino people and pay way more attention to the white race. Just like her.

"I for example know very little about the bible but know much about my own culture. At times I feel very outcasted when there are assignments that has to do with the bible. I remember I had a teacher my sophomore year that make me feel uncomfortable as if I was dumb only because I did not know about her culture."

### **Students feel their parents support their educational success**

The findings in this study reflect that teachers and administrators in urban schools do not feel that the home is supportive of the students' academic success. The students respond more favorably than the teachers when asked about their home, indicating that they do indeed have the support from their parents to do well in school. Culturally proficient educators are able to recognize the support families give their

as a stumbling block, but rather a resource: "We need to pull from any resources we can. When we ignore the home culture, we are ignoring potential resources we could use to help students succeed."

Schools with high academic success among their working-class and ethnic-minority students are able to empower parents, value the parents as resources, and connect with them (Noguera, 2003).

### **Teachers' perceptions of students' parents**

Teachers who perceive the students' homes as a support to the school find the school to be culturally proficient. Thus, school leaders who engage teachers in conversation about their own cultures and the culture of the students, emphasizing the positive aspects of the students' community and families, increase teacher connections to the parents.

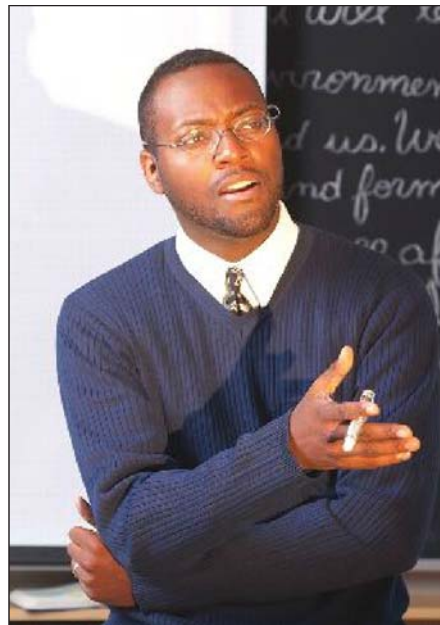
The teachers who do find the school to exhibit cultural proficiency also find worth in the students' homes and community.

More important to the students than a teacher's race or economic class in feeling a cultural connection is how the teachers perceive, treat and value the race and economic class of their students. One student comments on how a culturally proficient teacher is able to motivate students to do better:

"A student will feel very pleased if they know their teacher knows about their culture even though they are not of the same race. Personally, when a teacher knows about my culture I get motivated to do well because I see the interest they have in me so this motivates me to do my best and makes me want to give a little more extra 'me.'"

When school leaders and teachers begin to discuss and engage in conversation about culture and perceive the home of the students as a positive influence, they begin to discover a resource in the parents they previously did not recognize. The teachers who find a way to use the home culture of a student as a resource and not blame the home culture for student failures are more culturally proficient, build connections with the students and parents, and bring about an improvement in student academic performance.

It is sensible that teachers change their perceptions of the students' families rather than require that all the families change themselves to meet the teachers' preconceived notions of how families should be. Teachers embody cultural proficiency by



changing their own perceptions of the students' home culture.

### Forging connections

All high school students – especially those from marginalized minority backgrounds – participate more and do better academically in school settings where they are respected and accepted as equal members of the larger school community (Gibson, Bejinez, Hidalgo & Rolón, 2004). Working-class and ethnic minority students often struggle with an identity that is seemingly devalued in the school system.

Specifically, many Latino youth feel mis-

understood and marginalized as if they do not belong in school because teachers often have inadequate knowledge of the social, cultural and linguistic backgrounds of their Latino students. And when students feel their identities are being devalued or misunderstood, they are more likely to resist school authority and misbehave in class (Gibson, Gándara & Koyama, 2004).

Consequently, for working-class and ethnic-minority students to be successful in school, it not only requires students to learn the culture of the school, but educators to change their perceptions of the students' homes and families.

Many teachers and students stress that forging connections with students and parents comes with first recognizing and valuing the differences in culture. One student commented that culturally proficient educators "respect the cultural differences that make us unique." Another student said, "Having a connection will make both the student and teacher more successful."

### Professional development: Changing perceptions

Culturally proficient educational leaders understand that professional development is not something administrators do "to" teachers; rather it is something they participate in "with" teachers (Terrell & Lindsey, 2009). In addition to administrators investing time and energy on improving pedagogical practices and coordinating services to children, they also lead professional development to make learning about cultural groups and their experiences an integral part of the school (Noguera, 2003; Terrell & Lindsey, 2009).

Research indicates that in order for educators to be able to become culturally proficient and effective in cross-cultural settings, they must first clearly understand their own assumptions, beliefs and values about people and cultures different from themselves. Thus, culturally proficient educators make an introspective analysis of their own cultural attitudes, assumptions, mechanisms, rules and regulations inherent in their pedagogy; they step forward as leaders to examine their own values and behaviors and the policies and practices of the schools and

**A**uthor's note about the study: Through research at Claremont Graduate University pertaining to my dissertation, "A Comparison of Teacher and Student Perceptions of Cultural Proficiency at the High-school Level," I developed and conducted a study from three comprehensive high schools in greater Los Angeles. Using an electronic questionnaire, the teachers responded to questions about their own values about different cultures; their beliefs about working with students of various cultures, particularly ethnic-minority, working-class students; and their perceptions in general about how they and the school as a whole work within a culturally diverse community.

These data were then cross-referenced with results from an online confidential questionnaire completed by high school students attending those same schools. The students responded to questions that analyzed their perceptions of whether the teachers at the school, and school as a whole, are able to effectively work with and support the students' cultural values. The results from the students are used to compare educator and student perceptions about the cultural proficiency of the school and the teachers.

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how they relate to all students' needs (Terrell & Lindsey, 2009).

In professional development, educational leaders need to guide teachers in examining their own behaviors, assumptions and beliefs. How do we expect parents to become involved in school? Do we only contact parents regarding discipline and fundraising? Do we believe our students' parents support us in the classroom?

Once we candidly examine our own prejudices and expectations we can rephrase the conversations around how parents do support their children, listing the ways parents encourage their students in the classroom. How can we involve parents to show we appreciate their input and support? What cultural values do the parents bring? How can we treat our parents as assets rather than deficits? What actions do we take, or words do we say to students, to show we believe their parents and communities are advocates for education?

### Valuing parents, families and communities

When students perceive that their teachers value and respect their parents and communities, they are more likely to engage in learning with their teachers. As one student writes:

"I feel like I can relate more and feel more comfortable with the teacher if they have some sort of perspective of where I come from. In return, I strive to accomplish and learn more in a class as well as outside. I will also be more inclined to join a club and sport which helps the whole high school experience."

One student describes the positive example an educator had on her because of his ability to value and respect her family:

"He is the BEST EXAMPLE also A GREAT teacher on how it is really important for educators that are proficient in the home cultures of their students! Honestly coming from a student here...it MAKES THE BIGGEST IMPACT on us, and how we look, listen, and respect our teachers that teach us!"

When educational leaders use cultural proficiency as a tool to change their perceptions and the way they value their students' families and communities, academic suc-

## The teachers who find a way to use the home culture of a student as a resource build connections with students and parents bring about an improvement in student academic performance.

cess is the result. As educational leaders, we need to engage each other in conversations that build upon our school communities and find ways to connect with our parents through their cultural lenses. Through our words and actions, students will perceive that we value their parents and families, strengthening our connections and improving academic performance. The change begins within. ■

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