Cultural Responsiveness: Definitions and Principles

MCEAP Committee on Cultural Responsiveness

November 28, 2017, revised

Background

On September 12, 2017 the New York State Education Department Board of Regents were invited to take action during its December 2017 meeting to adopt the first of 11 consensus recommendations outlined in its Principal Preparation Project Advisory Team report. These recommendations were designed to improve the preparation of future school building leaders and support for current principals and called for shifting the basis of principal preparation from the *Interstate Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) Standards 2008 Standards* to the *Professional Standards for Educational Leaders* (*PSEL*) 2015. This change prompted two questions from the Regents during its July 18, 2017 and September 12, 2017 meetings: (1) *What is cultural responsiveness*? and (2) *What principles define it*? This memo aims to answer these questions in addition to the following six questions regarding its significance and utility in improving student achievement and school performance from a leadership perspective: (1) *Why is it needed?* (2) *How is it linked to our mission as an organization and a profession?* (3) *What is entailed?* (4) *What does it mean for practicing educators?* (5) *How is it achieved?* and (6) *What is the State Education Department's role?*

PSEL Standard 3: Equity and Cultural Responsiveness

The shift from ISLLC 2008 to PSEL 2015 reflects the inclusion of *Standard 3: Equity and Cultural Responsiveness*, which has a total of 8 elements, 3 of which go beyond ISLLC 2008, as outlined below:

Standard 3 – Effective educational leaders strive for equity of educational opportunity and culturally responsive practices to promote each student's academic success and well-being.

3a – Ensure that each student is treated fairly, respectfully, and with an understanding of each student's culture and context.
3f – Promote the preparation of students to live productively in and contribute to the diverse cultural contexts of a global society.
3g – Act with cultural competence and responsiveness in their interactions, decision making, and practice

The key contribution of PSEL Standard 3 is that it "requires leaders to ensure equity and cultural responsiveness for each student by encouraging perceptions of student diversity as an asset for teaching and learning, confronting and altering institutional biases rather than simply recognizing them, and serving as a true advocate for equity and cultural responsiveness in all aspects of leadership. In addition, the standard emphasizes preparing students to be productive in a diverse, global society rather than focusing only on improving their academic or social outcomes" (Center on Great Teachers & Leaders, 2016). We would like to propose a modification of this standard for New York State to go beyond cultural responsiveness to promote leadership that enacts cultural proficiency. We offer the following modification and a set of principles that support this.

PSEL Standard 3: Equity and Cultural ==proficiency==

Standard 3 – Effective educational leaders strive for equity of educational opportunity and <mark>*culturally proficient*</mark> *practices to promote each student's academic success and well-being.*

3a – Ensure that each student is treated fairly, respectfully, and with an understanding of each student's culture and context.
3f – Promote the preparation of students to live productively in and contribute to the diverse cultural contexts of a global society.
3g – <mark>*Intentionally demonstrate cultural competence*</mark> *and responsiveness in their interactions, decision making,* <mark>*development of systems and structures,*</mark> *and practice*
3h— <mark>*Model cultural proficiency and promote and develop cultural proficiency in others and their practices, advocate for and empower others to strive for equity of educational opportunities*</mark>

Response to the Regents' Question: What Guiding Principles Define Cultural Responsiveness?

Principle of respect. To value diversity and promote respect for all students' and staff's cultures and contexts.

Principle of inquiry. To question; to evaluate data, resources and practices; to identify barriers to student progress; to test out new approaches to foster equitable student experiences and outcomes; to engage in continuous improvement.

Principle of change. To disrupt patterns and systems of inequity to promote all students' academic success and well-being; to collaborate with the broader school community in striving for equity of educational opportunity and culturally proficient practices; to be a change agent to address context specific inequity; and to sustain improved practices while striving for continuous improvement.

Principle of leading learning. To model reflective practice and foster a growth mindset among the staff and larger school community; to promote learning on cultural competence and responsiveness and the preparation of students to live productively and contribute to the diverse cultural contexts of a global society; to engage and empower others to determine needs and solutions to promote equity of educational opportunities.

Principle of social justice. To accept responsibility for creating culturally inclusive and equitable environment; facilitate resource, program and policy equity to redistribute access, opportunities and conditions for equity of educational opportunity.

Given the clear focus on requiring leaders to serve as advocates for cultural responsiveness (as had been our original charge), we present a brief summary of the research literature on cultural responsiveness and related concepts.

Response to the Regents' Question: What is Cultural Responsiveness?

Cultural responsiveness requires individuals be cultural competent. This competency is having an awareness of one's own cultural identity and views about difference, and the ability to learn and build on the varying cultural and community norms of students and their families. It is the ability to understand the within-group differences that make each student unique, while celebrating the between-group variations that make our [world] a tapestry. that culturally responsive leaders need to continuously support minoritized students through examination of assumptions about race and culture. Further, they argue that as demographics continue to shift, so should practice that responds to student needs, understanding that it is "deleterious for students to have their cultural identities rejected in school and unacknowledged as

integral to student learning" (Khalifa, Gooden, & Davis, 2016).

In the most recent and comprehensive literature review of culturally responsive school leadership, Professors Muhammad Khalifa, Mark Gooden, and James Earl Davis (2016) observed that culturally responsive leaders need to continuously support minoritized students through an examination of their assumptions about race and culture. Further, they argue that as demographics continue to shift, so should leadership practices that respond to student needs, understanding that it is "deleterious for students to have their cultural identities rejected in school and unacknowledged as integral to student learning" (1285). While it is important for students to continue to feel comfortable in their respective physical and psychologically learning environments, it is also important for administrators, educators, policymakers and members of the communities to understand the process of being a constant learner. However, due to the fact that most administrators, teachers and policymakers do not always reflect our student populations, cultural experiences and how unknowingly projected into classroom setting, can have implications on the learning environment.

Examples of how educational practitioners (teachers and leaders) enact cultural responsiveness include:

1. Communication of High Expectations
2. Active Teaching Methods
3. Practitioner as Facilitator
4. Inclusion of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students
5. Cultural Sensitivity
6. Reshaping the Curriculum or Delivery of Services
7. Student-Controlled Discourse
8. Small Group Instruction

* In her 1994 book, The Dreamkeepers, Dr. Gloria Ladson Billings defined culturally responsive [practitioners] as possessing these eight principles

Why do we need it?

The social and cultural contexts of today's schools are diverse in ways that require greater attention to the educational philosophies, backgrounds, and perspectives of school leaders The cultural and racial identities of students, and those who serve them, have long continued to represent not only a demographic divide (Milner, 2007, 2008), but also growing degrees of *cultural mismatch*, which occurs when students experience incompatibility between their school and home cultures (Boykin, 1986; Delpit, 1995, 2006; Gay, 2000, 2002; Hale-Benson, 1986; Hilliard, 1967; Irvine, 1991; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Pollard & Ajirotutu, 2000). In some instances, this mismatch results in *cultural conflict* (Delpit, 1995), *cultural collision* (Beachum & McCray, 2004, 2008), and in more troubling scenarios, the practice of *cultural collusion* where teachers and school leaders implicitly usher out those students whose culture is not recognized or valued in the classroom or school setting (Beachum & McCray, 2004). In other cases, schools actively attempt to erase or "subtract" students' cultures through lack of relevance or responsiveness to the assets they bring with them (Valenzuela, 1999).

How is it linked to our mission as an organization and a profession?

In environments where educators are not aptly prepared or willing to meet the unique needs of students who represent underserved racial, ethnic, and cultural groups, student learning and achievement suffers. Education leaders who are preoccupied with compliance to high-stakes accountability goals and not proficient in terms of understanding their own cultural identity, practices and responsive are not prepared to meet the educational needs of their students. Subsequently, the strained relationships, discourse, and compromised learning opportunities in sites of cultural conflict present an educational challenge that becomes critically important for not only teachers to understand, but also for school leaders to both recognize and manage successfully as education professionals, which is not only ethical, but their professional duty.

What is entailed?

Unlike the field of teacher education, which has engaged in research that considers sociocultural contexts and factors as evidenced in the literature on multicultural education (Banks, 1993, 2005; Banks & Banks, 1988; Grant; 1992, Nieto, 1999; Sleeter & Grant, 1996; Sleeter & McClaren, 1996), culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1992, 1994, 1995, 1998), culturally responsive instruction (Gay, 2000, 2002), and anti-racist pedagogy (Cochran-Smith, 1995; Kailin, 2002; Lawrence & Tatum, 1997; Lee, 1998; 2006; Trepagnier, 2006), such considerations remain understudied in the field of educational leadership. There is, however, as Bustamante, Nelson, and Onwuegbuzie, (2009) noted in their work on schoolwide cultural competence and leadership preparation, a growing body of research that documents how "culturally responsive educational leadership positively influences academic achievement and students' engagement with the school environment (Banks & McGee-Banks, 2004; Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, & Gurin, 2002; Johnson, 2003, 2006; Juettner, 2003; Klingner et al., 2005; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Riehl, 2000; Skrla, Scheurich, Garcia, & Nolly, 2006a, 2006b)" (p. 794). Although we do not entirely attribute persistently racialized gaps in educational achievement and student performance to cultural mismatch, conflict, or collusion, we do believe such contexts warrant serious attention to the ways such manifestations of cultural and racial incongruence impact and inform the work of not only teachers, but the administrators who lead them, and through action or inaction, shape school culture (Brooks & Miles, 2010; Terrence & Deal, 1994).

What does it mean for practicing educators?

Instructionally, education leaders must consider the decisions being made and assessing and evaluating the roles they will play as culturally responsible teachers and classroom leaders. In his book "Culturally and Linguistically Responsive Teaching and Learning" (2012) Sharroky Hollie identifies the following eight elements of a culturally responsive learning environment:

1. Print Rich Environment
2. Learning Centers
3. Culturally Colorful
4. Optimum Arrangement
5. Multiple Libraries
6. Technology
7. Relevant Bulletin Boards
8. Displayed student work and images of students

These points are certainly not new to educators, but the goal is to be culturally mindful and aware while addressing them.

How is it achieved?

Enacting the changes needed to create learning environments for students that are created by educators who intentionally employ culturally proficient practices starts with agreement about and a common conceptual understanding of the concept of cultural responsiveness. Thoughtfully designed professional development follows from and seeks to build on a common conceptual understanding. Not surprisingly, effective professional development will account for the reality that individual educators approach this topic and view it through the lens of their own experience and background. For that reason, a scaffold of learning opportunities is needed that enables individual school building leaders to advance toward the aim of achieving cultural proficiency not just in their individual practice but also toward the goal of fostering that proficiency in staff. This means not just recognizing it and understanding it but expecting it, modeling it, coaching it, inspecting it, and rewarding it. To that end, we outline what we view as necessary to advance culturally responsive leadership.

In their framework for culturally relevant leadership, which they regard as interchangeable with Standard 3's conception of culturally responsiveness, Horsford, Grosland, and Gunn posit the following four P's as essential to the effective leadership: (1) political context, (2) pedagogical approach, (3) personal journey, and (4) professional duty. This framework serves as a synthesis of the research on culturally responsive pedagogy, culturally relevant pedagogy, and anti-racist pedagogy coupled with the expectation that education leaders demonstrate a solid understanding of their political and policy contexts, as well as the fact that their individual commitment to equity and cultural responsiveness is central to their professional duty as leaders.

We view educational leaders as going beyond having cultural proficiency knowledge and understanding. We believe that leaders must have the skills and capacities to create school conditions that remove barriers and reverse the effects of achieve better equity and learning outcomes for all children. We draw on Byrne-Jimenez and Orr (2013) and their discussion of social justice leadership to frame this further. As they stated:

> "One way to analyze this complexity is to explore how any definition addresses one of, or all, four basic questions: social justice *for whom*, social justice *by whom*, social justice *how*, and social justice *for what*. For purposes of evaluating social justice leadership preparation, we discuss what is included in the target (e.g. social justice for whom?), the actors to pursue social justice (e.g. social justice by whom?), the actions and strategies they are to take pursue social justice (e.g. social justice how?), and the equity outcomes to be achieved (e.g. social justice for what?), it is important to be aware of our "place" in this discussion. Without careful attention to doing *with* others instead of *on* others, we run risk of unintentionally replicating existing systems of oppression." (Byrne-Jimenez & Orr, 2013)

Their table below outlines a set of leadership skills and proficiencies that might be similarly applicable to our understanding of culturally proficient leadership.

Table : Social Justice Leadership Framework (Byrne-Jimenez & Orr, 2013)

Recognition	Reversal	Redistribution
Awareness of *self* as separate from cultural, historical context.	Awareness of *self* in context, culture, history and acceptance as a benefactor of disparate educational outcomes	Awareness of *self* in context of own power and privilege and acceptance of role in eradicating inequitable systems
Awareness of culture and history as factors in disparate		

educational outcomes.

Develop of self-consciousness	Develop critical thinking and an equity conscious Develop analytic skills to identify inequities in opportunities and outcomes	Develop critical interculturalism (locally/globally) Develop action-oriented skills to challenge and dismantle systems of inequity
Tolerate individual differences as necessary.	Appreciate and accommodate group differences	Value difference as a source of organizational/systemic strength and learning
Focus on racism of *others*. Localize effort in a personal context	Focus on *individual* "-isms" Localize effort in local/national context	Focus on *institutional* "-isms" Localize effort in global/transnational context that recognizes human and ecological connectivity
Develop an awareness of the capacity of leadership to foster social justice	Develop capacity to facilitate resources, program and policy equity to reversal inequitable outcomes and counter marginalizing forces Recognize barriers to student progress and create reactive systems and structures Develop the capacity to be a change agent to facilitate social justice Develop capacity to advocate for individuals/groups who suffer marginalization Enhance capacity to work on microsystem equity to address and/or compensate inequities	Extend capacity to work on macrosystem equity & transformation in order to prevent future inequities Develop capacity to facilitate resource, program and policy equity to redistribute access, opportunities, and conditions Develop capacity to create intercultural organization and proactive systems Make unequal distribution of resources to eradicate unequal conditions
Maintain power in order to address needs of other	Share power in order to empower others	Relinquish power in order to allow others to empower themselves

Source: Byrne-Jimenez, M., & Orr, M. T. (2013). Evaluating social justice leadership preparation. In L. Tillman & J. J. Scherich (Eds.), *Handbook of Research on Educational Leadership for Equity and Diversity,* . NY: Routledge.

What is the role of the State Department of Education?

The role of the State Department of Education (SED) is both supporting and holding school districts accountable for culturally responsive education and leadership practices.

1. Conduct or commission a labor workforce study on building and district-level administrators that capture the demographic profile and characteristics of New York state's education leaders.

2. Fund and support culturally responsive leadership preparation and ongoing professional development opportunities at the district level.

3. Provide technical assistance and support to school districts seeking external funding that supports culturally responsive education and leadership strategies and programming

4. Require school districts to include equity audits based in their annual reports that include data on a variety of deliverables, including administrator and teacher diversity, to include race, gender, years of teaching and administrative experience, licensure, certification, etc.

5. Recruit, hire, and sustain a racially, ethnically, culturally, and linguistically diverse cadre of administrators (departmental curriculum experts and program leaders) who mirror the diversity of the student body and demonstrate proficiency in culturally responsive education subjects, methods and pedagogy, including culturally responsive analysis, assessment, and evaluation.

Membership: MCEAP subcommittee on culturally responsive (and culturally proficient) leadership

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