

## Handout H3.2

# Five Principles of Culturally Proficient Leadership

### **Principle 1: Culture is a predominant force in people's lives**

Probably the easiest way to express this principle is to say that we are our culture. It permeates everything that we do and say. It has shaped our values, our beliefs, our perspectives, and our attitudes about everything about how we live and define the things that we value.

An analogy that may assist us in understanding this principle is that our culture is for us like water is for fish. They don't notice it, but it is there all around them and so much a part of their existence that they would find it difficult to describe and define. With some reflection, concentrated effort, and exposure to cultures other than our own, it becomes possible to define what our culture is for us.

This is particularly important in schools where the culture of the school guides and defines what is valued, what is rewarded, what behavior is acceptable, what appropriate clothing and hair styles are, what "good" food is, etc. In other words, the culture that defines the educational experience in culturally "non-proficient" schools becomes the water in which some children will sink and fail while others will swim and win.

### **Principle 2: The dominant culture serves people in varying degrees**

The culturally "non-proficient" school asks those outside of the "dominant" culture to adapt and be assimilated if they are to succeed. It asks them to become individuals that they are not. This principle is exhibited in a variety of ways and in varying degrees by the "dominant" culture in the school.

Individuals, in general, don't like change. Our educational institutions don't like change either. It is a stressful and difficult journey. Some institutions continue to work toward keeping things "as they are" and "as we are," regardless of the presence of other cultures within the classrooms and schools. As a result, children are pulled out of classes in order to provide for their "special needs," or they are "excused" and taught in separate classes because they don't speak "the" language. Frequently, in "non-proficient" schools these are the students who are "blamed" for the declining grades, and even for declining real estate values.

Leaders in culturally proficient schools acknowledge that their student populations and cultures are becoming more diverse. Staff engage with each other in dialogue and inquiry around questions such as, "How can we best ensure that every child can succeed in our school? What do we need to do to ensure that every student learns, with no exceptions?"

### **Principle 3: People have both personal identities and group identities**

Many educators who work in schools today are clear that the students who populate their classrooms are more diverse in terms of race/ethnicity and educational status, in particular, than were the classrooms from which those same educators received their education.

As this diversity continues to grow, it is critical that educators begin to develop knowledge of other cultures as well as acknowledge other groups and cultures. Educators following this principle will develop a "conscious tolerance, acceptance, and openness to diversity [that] enable us to interact effectively with individuals and groups who are different from us" (Lindsey, Roberts, & CampbellJones, 2005, p. 37).

Fear of what one does not know can lead to false assumptions and stereotyping not only about the culture, but also about each individual's relationship to that culture. Acknowledging the identity of the group does not mean "painting the group with a broad brush" relative to their shared values and beliefs or asking individual children to speak "for their culture" and "for their group."

An important aspect of this principle is that individuals within the group culture are seen, experienced, and valued as individuals, not as representatives of their group with common learning needs or perspectives.

#### **Principle 4: Diversity within cultures is vast and significant**

This principle asks us to acknowledge not only the diversity of cultures within the classroom and school, but the diversity within each of those cultures. For example, within the Hispanic community there are many different cultural groups: Puerto Rican, Mexican first generation, Mexican second generation, Costa Rican, Cuban Americans, Central Americans, South Americans, etc. In a similar way, every cultural group can be disaggregated by socioeconomic status; in fact, those in socioeconomic groups seem to share more common cultural characteristics than those in racial/ethnic groups (Gordon, 1964). The more knowledge and experience we have of different cultures and groups, the less we will fear our differences, the fewer assumptions we will make, and the more progress we will make in talking about, accepting, and valuing our differences so that we are more effectively able to interact and teach children who are different than ourselves.

#### **Principle 5: Each individual and each group has unique cultural values and needs**

Research indicates that children begin to form their cultural identity very early in life and that they begin to ascertain how their culture and ethnic group "ranks" in the dominant culture. Indeed, these perceptions become pernicious self-fulfilling prophecies for many children, follow them throughout their lifetime, and are internalized as part of their self-identity. This principle asks us to respond to the question: Do we believe that all students can learn? It asks us to examine our assumptions about who can learn and who cannot. It asks us to explore why we think the way we do, and to do this consciously and with courage in order to eliminate any potentially detrimental and harmful attitudes about our students that would prevent them from believing that we believe in them—without exception. It asks us to honor and respect them as well as their unique cultural needs.

Adapted from Randall B. Lindsey, Laraine M. Roberts, & Franklin Campbell Jones, *The Culturally Proficient School: An Implementation Guide for School Leaders*, 2005, pp. 21-50. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin. Used with permission.

Gordon, Milton M. (1964). *Assimilation in American Life: The role of race, religion, and national origins*. New York: Oxford University Press.