

The Need for Cultural Proficiency in OPS

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Abstract

In order to answer the overarching question, “Do the staff and administration of Omaha Public Schools (OPS) need to be culturally proficient?” we conducted an in-depth analysis of the research literature. This analysis was stimulated by the negative uproar from Omaha media and opinion outlets surrounding OPS’ plan to encourage a school system-wide conversation about cultural proficiency. This conversation is to be based on having all staff, teachers and administrators read and discuss a book titled The Cultural Proficiency Journey: Moving Beyond Ethical Barriers Toward Profound School Change.

As a result of our analysis, we conclude that culturally proficient educators are better teachers, and as such, are better equipped to assist schools in improving academic achievement among those sub-populations of students that historically under-perform. We demonstrate that white privilege does, indeed, exist in Omaha, and that culturally proficient educators have the tools to help overcome white privilege and challenge racism and other “isms.” Finally, we argue that it is morally incumbent upon OPS to increase its own cultural proficiency so that the vast diversity of children across the spectrums of class, religion, culture, race, ethnicity, gender-identity, sexuality, academic ability, physical ability, and language ability, can reach their highest potential.

Keywords: diversity, white privilege, race, bias, discrimination, cultural competence, cultural proficiency

The primary question before us is, “Do the staff and administration of Omaha Public Schools (OPS) need to be culturally proficient?” Our answer is a resounding, “Yes!”

We at the Progressive Research Institute of Nebraska believe that any other answer (1) is unethical, (2) disregards the basics of good teaching, (3) fails to recognize the desperate need in Omaha and throughout this country to challenge racism and white privilege within our educational system, and (4) ignores the fact that cultural proficiency is inextricably intertwined with improved academic performance.

Ethics and Good Teaching

It is fundamentally right and ethical for OPS to advocate for and engage all students in a positive, equitable and just manner that honors individual differences (Taylor, 2010). It would be unethical for OPS to permit its educators and staff to retain indifferent or even well-meaning but ultimately destructive attitudes and actions. Therefore, we applaud the commitment of OPS to build cultural proficiency among staff, teachers and administrators.

Some would say, not only is improving cultural proficiency in schools morally right, but it is just good teaching (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Marbley, 2007; Lachuk, 2011). A culturally proficient teacher is one who incorporates students’ culture into lessons so that culture becomes “a vehicle for learning (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 161).” There are many characteristics of a good teacher (one who is, for example, knowledgeable, inviting, inclusive, enthusiastic, passionate, vital), but a critical piece for any successful teacher is to be able to make positive connections between what students are interested in at home and classroom lessons (Educational Research Service, 2001), thereby using culture to create “a bridge to school learning (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 161).”

To aid us in confronting those nay-sayers for whom morality combined with plain old good teaching techniques are insufficient motivation to act, it is a lucky thing that there is scientific evidence to back up the claim that culturally proficient educators are better equipped to assist schools in improving academic achievement among those sub-populations of students that historically do worse (e.g., poor; minority; female). But, from a purely ethical point of view, it is not necessary to trot out the evidence. When an action is morally correct, we value that action purely because it is just. It is only necessary to say that enhancing cultural proficiency is the moral, it is the right, it is the correct, it is the ethical approach to human interaction in our schools and everywhere else.

Unfortunately, the nay-sayers abound, and there has been a lot of negative hullabaloo from the Omaha media and other opinion outlets directed at OPS for its attempt to increase cultural proficiency within the school system. At present, OPS’ plan is to encourage a school system-wide conversation based on having all staff, teachers and administrators read and discuss the book titled [The Cultural Proficiency Journey: Moving Beyond Ethical Barriers Toward Profound School Change](#), by Franklin CampbellJones, Brenda CampbellJones and Randall B. Lindsey. The book focuses on building cultural competencies, i.e., helping faculty and staff understand and value the culture they identify with, but in particular to value the cultures of those around them.

In response to OPS' plan to use The Cultural Proficiency Journey, the editorial staff of the Omaha World-Herald bemoaned the potentially harmful impact that discussing "white privilege" and "tak[ing] action for social justice" will have on OPS employees and students (Omaha World-Herald, July 12, 2011). Further, the World-Herald editorial crankily implied that reading the book promotes guilt trips (presumably among whites) and a culture of victimization. At Omaha News Radio 1110 KFAB, talk radio host Scott Voorhees took heated issue with OPS' approach. Voorhees denied the existence of white privilege and stated that "we are long past institutional racism in this country (Voorhees, 2011)." The conservative, Nebraska-based Platte Institute for Economic Research characterized as "offensive" the book's propositions that "white privilege exists in America," and that "the dominant culture marginalizes many people in this country (Hillmer, 2011)."

It is a crying shame that in this day and age so many people are still offended by the truth—the truth that racism exists here and now—and the truth that since racism exists, it de facto results in privilege to some (e.g., white people) and marginalization and oppression of others (e.g., black, Hispanic and Native American people). For the sake of the health and well-being of the children of Omaha, we desperately need to move beyond reactionary nay-saying and instead embrace a more comprehensive and—more importantly—moral point of view. Our ethical principles are a roadmap for life that guide us and tell us how to live and how to behave.

The Omaha Public Schools serves a multicultural student body that is going to become even more multicultural (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). OPS' mission is, in part, to "provide educational opportunities which enable all students to achieve their highest potential (Omaha Public Schools, 2010)." Behind the OPS mission is the assumption that, as a community, we function better when each of us is operating at his or her fullest educational capacity. There is little doubt that if senior OPS decision makers, faculty and staff work together to enhance cultural proficiency, it will increase the commitment and support needed to improve the outcome OPS ultimately desires: educated and successful graduates across the cultural spectrum (Coggins, 2001; Brown-Jeffy, 2011).

We believe it is wrong to decry attempts by OPS to overcome cultural biases, because through this work OPS is endeavoring to guarantee every student is treated in a manner that is socially just. In fact, the OPS approach is just one small step to achieve the ultimate goal of educational success for every child. And it is a mistake to raise the cry of "not now" in response to these efforts. The same cry was used to tell President Roosevelt not to integrate the war effort during WWII. It was used to tell President Truman not to integrate the armed forces. It was used to say that the 1964 Civil Rights Act was "too much, too soon." The Progressive Research Institute of Nebraska applauds the OPS effort, and says it is long overdue. As our city and state becomes more diverse, our public institutions should positively reflect those changes.

Racism and White Privilege

White privilege is fact, not fiction. White privilege is a fact throughout the United States, and it is a fact here in Omaha. When whites have advantages that people of color do not have, "white privilege" exists. When white people are treated better than people of color, then "white privilege" exists. When white people are exempt from one or more of the problems experienced by people of color,

then “white privilege” exists.

White privilege is an “unearned advantage (Leonardo, 2004, p. 137),” one that exists because individual and institutionalized racism has benefited whites to the detriment of people of color. The National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders noted in 1968, “What white Americans have never fully understood but what the Negro can never forget—is that white society is deeply implicated in the ghetto. White institutions created it, white institutions maintain it, and white society condones it.” This statement is equally true today as in 1968. That said, we have to ask ourselves the question, “How can it be that so many still claim to be oblivious to white privilege while it is so painfully obvious to others?”

The United States has evolved as a nation where white (Western European) people unmistakably enjoyed—and continue to enjoy—a more privileged position than people of color. White slave owners in the U.S. directly profited from the free labor of more than three hundred years of enslaving some 500,000 Africans (In Motion, 2011) and their many, many millions of American-born slave descendants. Slavery severely undermined and damaged the social evolution of blacks in the United States, and the destructive legacy of “centuries of the master-slave relationship between whites and blacks (Leonardo, 2004, p. 147)” endures today.

At our founding, except in Vermont, only white male landowners could vote. Congress’ 1790 Naturalization Act permitted only free white people to become naturalized U.S. citizens. Following the Civil War and enactment of the 13th, 14th, and 15th amendments, Jim Crow and Black Codes remained across the South to the benefit of whites. In the North, the migration of blacks northward during the period around the two World Wars was accompanied by racial strife including lynching and race riots.

In 1975, the Eighth Circuit Court of Appeals ordered desegregation of the Omaha public schools after a clear finding of purposeful segregation. The ruling reads, in part: “We conclude that sufficient evidence was presented to establish that segregation in the Omaha School District was intentionally created and maintained (United States of America v. School District of Omaha, 1975).” Similar court rulings were based on the application of the so-called “color-blind” policies of the GI Bill, Veterans Administration, and Federal Housing Administration that resulted in redlining and restrictive covenants. The school integration that followed was quickly accompanied by “white flight” from urban downtowns to the suburbs.

Ironically, the bulk of this summer’s media uproar over OPS’ purchase of [The Cultural Proficiency Journey](#) arose at exactly the same time (July, 2011) that the Pew Research Center published its findings revealing that the gap in household wealth between whites, blacks and Hispanics is at its largest since the government began publishing this information 25 years ago (Taylor, 2011). (The Pew Research Center measures household wealth by taking total household assets and subtracting total debt). The findings are evidence that the passage of the Equal Pay, Civil Rights, and Voting Rights Acts in the 1960s failed to level the proverbial playing field. The passing of wealth from one generation to the next is important in the U.S. because with wealth comes a vast expansion of opportunities.

For those who doubt that Omaha is a microcosm of our nation, here is the picture of white privilege as it exists today in Omaha:

- Children in Poverty: More than half (51%) of black children in Omaha live in poverty (Drozd, 2011). That is more than 5 times the rate for white children (9%) (Drozd, 2011). Among Omaha's Hispanic population, 29% of children live in poverty (Drozd, 2011). According to an analysis of the 100 largest metropolitan areas in the United States conducted by the Omaha World-Herald, Omaha ranks No. 1 in the nation for black children in poverty (Omaha World-Herald, January 6, 2011).
- Overall Poverty: Of the nation's 100 largest metropolitan areas, Omaha ranks third in black poverty (Omaha World-Herald, January 6, 2011). Well over one-third of Omaha's blacks live in poverty (36%); more than one in five Hispanics live in poverty (22%); that is compared to 9% of whites (Omaha World-Herald, January 6, 2011).
- Unemployment: Nearly one in five blacks in Omaha is out of work (18%), compared to 5% for whites, and 7.5% for Hispanics (Cordes, 2011). According to the World-Herald, "Omaha has the eighth-highest black unemployment rate (Cordes, 2011)" among the 100 largest metropolitan areas in the nation.
- Median Household Income: The term "median household income" means the point at which 50% of households have an income above that number, and 50% of households have an income below it. For blacks in Omaha, the median household income is \$24,174 (Cordes, 2011). This shocking fact means that half of Omaha's black households have an income below that figure. For Hispanics, the median income is \$38,326; for whites, it is \$53,219—substantially more than twice that of black households (Cordes, 2011). According to the World-Herald, "While black families struggle, median incomes for the city's white residents are among the highest in the nation (Grace, 2011)."

It is within our schools that our children will be shaped. If we want them all to become all that they can be, we need their teachers, administrators, and all staff who come into contact with them daily, to help elevate them—not grind them down. As the statistics above illustrate, Omaha's children of diverse backgrounds enter school facing the greatest challenges to success in life. In school, our children deserve for those challenges to be minimized. It is the responsibility of the schools to make that happen.

Cultural Proficiency and Evidence of Effectiveness

The science of human behavior reveals that assumptions, attitudes and perceptions (including unconscious ones) affect behavior. Cultural proficiency is the process of becoming aware of the cultural biases, attitudes and beliefs we all carry around with us, and then critically examining those biases and the impact they have on our behavior. The theory behind increasing the cultural proficiency of educators is that as their cultural proficiency increases, their perceptions and behaviors will change. As the attitudes and beliefs of educators evolve, they will better understand the wide array of individuals who make up a diverse student body; and, ultimately, they will more effectively interact with a culturally heterogeneous group of students (Lin, 2008; Coggins, 2008).

Changing Perceptions Lead to Changing Skills

“Teachers who work in the complicated world of urban schools must be prepared to teach in culturally responsive ways so that the assets and skills of students and their families are recognized and incorporated into the formal and hidden curriculum of schools. Often, teachers who come from the mainstream, dominant middle class culture of the United States need to learn to understand and value the cultural perspectives and skills that their urban students bring to school. For many white and middle class teachers, understanding and valuing means adopting new perspectives on what constitutes learning, skills, and family involvement. Changing values and dispositions is difficult work since it challenges long held beliefs and attitudes (Salisbury, 2005, p. 8).”

The problem of achievement gaps (as determined by measures such as test scores, graduation rates and college success) between some student subgroups and others is a complex one that researchers believe is rooted in a combination of societal, cultural and school factors (Smith, 2005; Education Research Service, 2001; Education Week, 2011). First, there is a student’s economic status (including nutrition, access to health care, access to educational resources, and stability of residence); then, there are social and cultural factors, including English language ability, preparation for learning, parent educational attainment, parent involvement, stability of family structure, not to mention the historical and every-day trauma of racism and other “isms.” Finally, there are school factors, including level of school funding, teacher quality and effectiveness, as well teacher and staff prejudices and biases, including ethnocentrism, racism and other “isms” (Olszewski-Kubilius, 2003; Smith, 2005).

At the same time that OPS’ student body is becoming more and more diverse, teachers at OPS schools (and across the nation) are staying overwhelmingly white—and there is no sign that will change any time soon (Ford, 2004; Brown-Jeffy, 2011). To put these numbers in perspective, there were nearly 29,966 minority students enrolled in OPS in 2010 (61% of the student body). Yet among OPS’ 3,378 teachers that year, a mere 262 were minority (less than 8%). Research shows us that within schools, the intersection of minority culture (as represented by a diverse student body) with majority culture (as represented by overwhelmingly white, middle-class teachers) tends to result in lower academic achievement among diverse students (Olszewski-Kubilius, 2003; Ukpokedu, 2004).

The evidence is in: Culture does impact teaching and learning. When teachers in OPS are overwhelmingly based in different cultural norms than the students they teach, good teaching can only happen if those teachers work really hard to improve their cultural proficiency (Marbley, 2009).

One of the many ways that increased cultural proficiency can help reduce the achievement gap is because teachers who are “more conscious of their own attitudes and behaviors” won’t “unintentionally communicate low expectations for low-achieving students—by calling on them less frequently, for example, or giving them less time to answer questions (Education Research Service, 2001).” Research shows that when teachers have lower expectations for minority students, those children take “fewer advanced courses and receiving less rigorous curricula, even if they are from affluent families (Olszewski-Kubilius, 2003).”

Speaking specifically to the achievement gap between racial groups, two scholars from Harvard University and the University of Pennsylvania write that “the gap is merely another reflection of the disparities in experience and life chances for individuals from different racial groups (Noguera, 2000).” This remark can be applied just as well to other sub-groups of students whose academic performance is historically poor (Education Week, 2004). These authors add that since “educational patterns generally mimic other social patterns, we should not be surprised (Noguera, 2000)” by the disparities.

How Best to Increase Cultural Proficiency

The Omaha media is not shy about informing local taxpayers about OPS expenditures, especially ones it sees as unsuitable. That in this environment of scrutiny OPS still saw fit to spend \$131,000 in an attempt to improve the cultural proficiency of its staff, teachers and administration, speaks volumes. It is a very clear indicator that the administration of OPS strongly believes that the district is in need of a makeover in the area of cultural proficiency.

Changes in school district and/or state policy have a demonstrably small effect on improving academic achievement (Braun, 2010; Wang, 1993/1994). Instead, research shows that classroom instruction and climate along with school culture are the most critical school-based factors involved in the academic achievement of students (Wang, 1993/1994). The factors associated with classroom instruction and climate all have to do with direct classroom practice: the specifics of how an individual teacher interacts with students. School culture reflects the degree to which the guiding beliefs of a particular school are “conducive to teaching and learning (Wang, 1993/1994, p. 78).” In general teachers have little training in cultural proficiency (Lin, 2008). But, the good news is that it is possible to improve teachers’ intercultural sensitivity (Lin, 2008).

It is difficult to say whether or not it was a reasonable and desirable expense for OPS to pay \$131,000 for 8,000 copies of *The Cultural Proficiency Journey*. The book is intended as a tool, and includes a series of guided questions and case studies for use by individuals and groups intent on working towards enhanced cultural proficiency. But, is it the right tool?

The book certainly addresses these three important points:

1. That “moral purpose is an important feature for setting the course of action in schools (CampbellJones, 2010, p. 63);
2. That “cultural proficiency is about educators being fully aware of their biases and displaying a willingness to examine them in order to better serve students and their families (CampbellJones, 2010, p. 39);”
3. That “we need to recognize and dismantle historical forms of oppression that are operational in schools (CampbellJones, 2010, p. 77).”

On the potentially negative side, the language of the book can be complex, sometimes bordering on academic—and that might turn off some readers.

Ostensibly, the book is to be distributed to all teachers, administrators and staff, and the district will

use the book as a jumping-off point for staff and teacher discussion around the need for cultural proficiency. If a discussion here and there is all that happens as a result, then the answer will be, “No, this was not a useful expenditure.” However, if discussions lead to positive changes in how schools operate—and in how the individuals within those schools behave—then the answer will be, “Yes, this was a valuable expenditure.” As the authors of The Cultural Proficiency Journey state, “the true test of professional learning is whether anything changes enough to result in positive effects on the lives of children (CampbellJones, 2010, p. 79).”

Is Cultural Proficiency Enough?

The history of school reform in the United States illustrates that statements of district policy are not enough, and all too frequently actions are also insufficient to address the entrenched problem of academic achievement gaps. However, history also shows us that change can happen. It did during the 1970s and 1980s, during the era of school desegregation and anti-poverty programs (Johnston, 2000), and it can again.

While enhancing cultural proficiency among educators, administration and staff is without a doubt the right thing to do, it is not the be-all and end-all of school reform. School reform will require a system-wide, long-term commitment to profound change. Since people support what they help create, any change will require the buy-in and participation of all stakeholders, which means that change will have to actively include students and their parents in the process. And, it will require an intense commitment to an evolution of culture at the district and individual school levels so that: (1) Funding and other resources are allocated equitably between schools; (2) The best teachers and administrators are rewarded for moving to and staying at the most diverse schools; and (3) Curricula is adapted to be culturally responsive and inclusive.

The Omaha Public Schools can change its culture so that the vast diversity of children across the spectrums of class, religion, culture, race, ethnicity, gender-identity, sexuality, academic ability, physical ability, and language ability, can reach their highest potential. It is the moral thing to do. It is the only thing to do.

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