

CULTURAL COMPETENCY IN SCHOOLS: Excellence and equity for all children

Janice Crawford

This year Education Initiatives has begun to include professional development sessions designed to support a major strategy that the Ball Foundation believes can lead to systemic transformation that results in increased achievement for all students. This strategy is to deepen school staff's knowledge and understanding of the cultural habits and norms of students and families into classroom practice. Sessions focus on parental involvement, one of the seven components of the Focus on Results framework.

The foundation believes that school staff at all levels must gain greater understanding and competence about the cultures of all children and families in their schools. Cultural competence is defined as a set of congruent behaviors, attitudes, practices and policies that come together in a system and enable that system to work effectively in cross-cultural situations. (Adapted from the

National Association of School Psychologists).

The foundation also believes that the professional knowledge and skills needed by highly qualified staff, especially for those working with culturally or linguistically diverse students and families, must go beyond mastering content, pedagogy, and classroom management skills. These are necessary but not sufficient qualities to ensure that traditionally under-performing students achieve at high levels. Staff in schools that serve these students and families must also understand their own culture, as well as that of their students' families, to build the relationships and contextual connections that are just as essential as cognitive practices and skills to the teaching-learning process. An operational definition and a set of orienting concepts—based primarily on the work of anthropologist Barbara Rogoff—serve as the research-based

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framework in which the next two years' new institute sessions are grounded.

Operational Definition of Culture

Culture is a network of invisible webs comprised of values, beliefs, and ideas about appropriate behavior, and socially constructed truths. (Adapted from the Educational Alliance, Brown University)

Orienting Concepts

- Culture is not just what other people do. It is common for people to think of themselves as having no culture or to take for granted the circumstances of their historical period, unless they have contact with several cultural communities.
- Understanding one's own cultural heritage, as well as other cultural communities, requires taking the perspective of people of contrasting backgrounds. The most difficult cultural processes to examine are the ones that are based on confident and unquestioned assumptions stemming from one's own community's practices.
- Cultural practices fit together and are connected. Cultural processes have coherence beyond "elements" such as economic resources, family size, marital status, etc.
- There is not likely to be one best way. Learning from other communities does not require giving up one's own ways. It

does require suspending one's own assumptions temporarily to consider others and carefully separating efforts to understand cultural phenomena from efforts to judge their value. (Source: Barbara Rogoff, *The Cultural Nature of Human Development*)

Cultural Competence and Family Engagement

The Ball Foundation believes that families must be full partners in the education of their children in order for students to achieve at high levels regardless of race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, native language, or culture. The foundation further believes that effective family involvement is not piecemeal or programmatic but grows out of the academic, social, and environmental goals of schools and is fully integrated into the strategies and activities for reaching these goals. The organizational structure developed by Joyce Epstein and her colleagues at Johns Hopkins National Network of Partnership Schools serves as the framework for developing comprehensive family engagement strategies.

The Ball Foundation

The Ball Foundation is a 29-year-old non-profit operating foundation that conducts programs in two areas, Career Vision and Education Initiatives. The foundation also undertakes research to ensure the continuous improvement of its programs and practices. The foundation's mission is to help individuals recognize and develop their potential.

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The following are the research-based guiding principles—the first six of which were developed at Johns Hopkins—that serve to guide the foundation’s strategy for family engagement:

- Most families are reachable, but schools are either not trying to involve them or are not knowledgeable about or sensitive to ways to overcome cultural and social class barriers.
- The school’s practices of informing and engaging families are stronger determinants of whether urban, poor families will be engaged with their children’s education than are parent education, family size, marital status, and even student grade level.
- The more the relationship between families and educators approaches a comprehensive, well-planned partnership, the higher the student achievement.
- Families are much more likely to become engaged when educators encourage and assist families in helping their children with their schoolwork.
- Effective family engagement strategies must be designed around the strengths and assets of all families, not around the real or perceived deficits of some families.
- The combined effects of family, school, and community are stronger than the independent effect of supports from each one. Regardless of age, family structure, sex and poverty status, when a student receives support from the family, community, and school, the effects on his/her academic achievement are magnified.
- Schools can play a critical role in fostering and deepening resiliency in children and families. Protective factors make a

more profound impact on the lives of children who grow up under adverse conditions than do specific risk factors or stressful life events. They appear to transcend ethnic, social class, geographical, and historical boundaries.

Cultural Competence and Literacy

Next year the foundation is planning to work with district partners to fully integrate cultural knowledge about children and families into effective classroom literacy practices. The foundation believes that the development of high levels of literacy, especially for culturally and linguistically diverse students, is not simply dependent on the mastery of cognitive skills or the use of cognitively based intervention strategies. It believes that the process of becoming literate is highly contextual and dependent on trusting relationships between culturally and linguistically diverse students and their teachers. Thus, cognitive-based strategies will only result in higher levels of literacy achievement for the majority of culturally and linguistically diverse students when they are integrated with knowledge and practices that build on the experiences and meanings which students bring with them into the school setting.

Look for more information about cultural competency in future issues of *Review*. ■

COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE LOCAL FORMATION CONTINUES

Rex Babiera, Anne-Marie Bracken and Joann Ricci

On October 13th –15th, Ball Foundation partners from Chula Vista, Northview, Springfield, Arizona Ball Charter Schools' representatives, Education Initiatives' staff, and consultants, as well as foundation board members convened for the Partnership Learning Network's (PLN) national meeting at the Doral Eaglewood Conference Center in Itasca, Illinois.

The intended outcomes of the PLN are to

- Learn with and from one another about communities of practice
- Share knowledge about promising instructional, organizational and leadership practices that are working
- Build relationships
- Develop specific plans for creating communities of practice at the school and district levels and increase the capacity to implement them

At the October event, promising practices were shared in depth, and interpersonal connections were established and enhanced. Time was allocated for district staff to plan further communities of practice work and select processes to share and deepen the learning at their sites.

The following are three stories that illustrate teacher, district and school-to-school perspectives on how communities of practice are being implemented in the partnership school systems.

Springfield

District Perspective

Springfield decided that the Practice Marketplace and Exchange, patterned after a farmer's produce market, was a powerful process for sharing. This exchange allows people to view a variety of organizational and instructional practices and engage in

meaningful conversation with peers to foster new ideas and innovation. Opportunity for deeper inquiry follows a brief shopping session. Springfield planned to recreate the experience for the Department of Instruction (DOI) so they could use the process for staff development.

On November 18th, principals and teachers from the seven partnership schools who attended the October PLN meeting engaged in a marketplace to share their promising practices with the DOI in order to prepare for a district-wide event that is planned for March.

Feedback from the November 18th event included the following statements:

"It wasn't something we read about in a journal somewhere else...it was a real example of what was going on in our own district."

"The experts were the teachers doing the practice...living and breathing the promising practice and that person gave it so much credibility."

"This was a way to see a practice in a different way, in another school, in depth and get information out and that's what we're lacking."

"We are careful about including all different learning styles for kids and with adults we forget...with this process we could tap into the modality of a variety of learners."

Chula Vista

School-to-School Perspective

The six schools that represented the Chula Vista Elementary School District (CVESD) at the October PLN meeting are building a community of practice around independent reading as a component of a comprehensive literacy program. More than fifty teachers and principals from Casillas, Chula Vista

Hills, Chula Vista Learning Community Charter, Feaster-Edison, Harborside, and Tiffany schools have attended all-day community meetings on November 1st and December 7th. These meetings, designed by Chula Vista practitioners, Ball Foundation staff, and consultants, have featured a blend of building community within and across schools, introducing new literacy content, and dialoguing around how to implement independent reading practices.

At the November meeting, independent reading was introduced as the focus of the community of practice. In December, the community began to look deeper into specific practices, in particular the “first twenty days” of lessons in independent reading and individual reading conferences, with students as powerful assessments. By the end of the December meeting, each school had drafted an initial action plan for how to implement some of these new strategies while deepening learning within their buildings.

Educators in Chula Vista are beginning to explore what is possible in their community of practice. They have experienced the power of peers coming together, having conversations that matter, and engaging in inquiry around reading practices.

Below are a few comments from community members about the work so far:

“It is starting to shift our thinking from using external experts to looking at our own staff and learning from one another as peers.”

“Our six schools are beginning to develop common language and strategies. This may help with student mobility issues and when students move from grade to grade.”

“The models and protocols (from the community of practice) around collaborating



with one another can be used in our classrooms with our students.”

“The community of practice breaks down vertical knowledge, creates self-empowerment, and increases individual accountability.”

“We can migrate learning faster.”

“Building collective knowledge speeds up learning for our students.”

Northview

Teacher Perspective

Anita Flynn, a 2nd grade teacher at North Oakview Elementary School, modified the practice of world café that she learned at a previous PLN meeting and brought it into her classroom. The world café is an intentional, non-linear, structured conversation that generates new ideas and new connections. People are organized in small groups at round tables. Focusing on a question that generates energy and challenges assumptions, the groups engage in meaningful conversations that can lead to more focused learning and/or setting in motion or sustaining organizational changes.

Ms. Flynn used focus questions around rights and responsibilities in the classroom. Students learned a different way of sharing and working together. They decided upon process roles themselves – who would act as host and who would record the conversations. Besides bringing a new protocol to her students, Anita also gained knowledge about how asking the right questions makes the world café a more effective learning tool. ■

See World Café Primer on page 6

PRACTICE PRIMER: THE WORLD CAFÉ

The World Café is an intentional, non-linear, structured conversation that generates new ideas and new connections. This process was developed by Juanita Brown (and colleagues), a consultant and former organizer for the United Farm Workers movement. The World Café emerged from observing how change in systems—from organizations to communities to large social movements—arises from non-linear, non-directed conversations about questions that matter. It is designed to maximize connections in a group, and is modeled after café society (think of the café society that led to the French revolution) in which conversations and participants come and go, ebb and flow.

The Café process is simple.

People are organized in small groups—4 to 6 at a round table.

Each group picks a host, who will hold the essence of the conversation.

A question is introduced—a question that matters. It's a question that allows people to bring more of themselves into the conversation, something with aspiration and inspiration, but still connected to the work of the group.

The conversation begins, and goes for 20 to 30 minutes. Then people disperse to other tables, and begin the conversation anew.

The host stays at his or her table, invites in the new participants, and shares the essence of the conversation.

The conversation is generally iterated three times, with a return to the initial home group for a brief check-in.

The process concludes with a whole group dialogue about the café and what emerged through it.

The World Café can be adapted to many issues, environments and groups—anywhere you want to create a greater sense of connectedness, individual contribution, and collective or shared foundations. This process has been used for setting in motion and sustaining large organizational changes, as well as for focused learning; it's been used in corporations and school leadership teams; and it can generate collective vision or design new practices.

Though in its essence a simple process, the World Café rests on six principles that must be used:

Clarify the Purpose. Why are we doing this? What is the question that matters to this group?

Create Hospitable Space. Pay attention to the quality of the physical environment.

Explore Questions That Matter. They should generate energy and challenge assumptions.

Encourage Everyone's Contribution. It's more than participating; it's contributing to make a difference.

Connect Diverse Perspectives. Link the essence of ideas and insights to ever-widening circles.

Listen for Insights and Share Discoveries. After several rounds, engage in a whole group conversation.

*Look for the **Café To Go**, a quick reference guide for putting conversations to work, on the web at www.theworldcafe.com. ■*

A LESSON FROM MY DAD (G. CARL BALL)

Anna Ball

My father taught me one of the most valuable lessons that I've ever learned: Everything that you do can always be better. I remember the exact experience that crystallized this lesson for me.

I was learning the horticulture business from the ground up, so to speak, and was put in charge of the company's trial gardens for the first time. The trial gardens are extremely important for the company since that's where we determine which varieties and colors of flowers respond best to which conditions. Furthermore, groups from throughout the world come to visit the gardens. I was so proud of how I had laid out the gardens and thought they were the most extraordinary gardens ever created. I couldn't wait to show them to Dad and hear him tell me what an outstanding job I had done.

Well the day finally arrived, and I enthusiastically walked Dad through the gardens. At the end of our tour, I stood anxiously waiting for him to sing my praises. Instead he said, "Anna, these gardens are boring." I just knew I had heard him wrong. "Dad," I asked in astonishment, "what did you say?" "I said that these trial gardens are boring, Anna. They need to be exciting, spectacular."

You can imagine my disappointment. My dad, whose opinion I valued, thought my pride and joy was boring. I was indignant for several days, and then I finally went back to look at the garden to try and see what he saw. To my amazement, I saw that he was right. The trial gardens - my trial gardens - really were boring.

Dad had asked Guy Rando, a landscape architect, to view the gardens. So here was

this eccentric looking fellow in purple pants who stated that they were "like rooms without furniture." Right then I pledged to redesign them so that there were places that would break up the sight lines, create vertical terrain, etc. Most of all I aimed to settle for nothing less than the absolutely most extraordinary gardens that had ever been created.

To continue to strive for excellence and settle for nothing less is one of the most valuable of many lessons I learned from my father, and it has guided me well on my life's journey. Thanks, Dad. ■



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IS YOUR SCHOOL OPEN TO PARTNERSHIP WITH PARENTS? Self-assessment questions

Try using the following questions to begin to evaluate how well your school partners with parents.
(Circle **a**=always, **s**=sometimes, **n**=never)

- 1) *What is your school's attitude toward families?*
- Our school sets high standards for all students and families. It partners with families to make sure every single student succeeds. (**a, s, n**)
- 2) *Does the school give families information about standards and the curriculum?*
- Families help assess student portfolios, using scoring guides. They also attend regular exhibits of student work, where students explain how it meets standards. (**a, s, n**)
- 3) *Can parents and family members easily see the principal and visit classrooms?*
- Parents are involved in all aspects of the school. They can attend staff training, and the principal has regular hours each week to meet with families. Every school committee has active parent members. (**a, s, n**)
- 4) *Does the school have an active parent group, such as a PTA or Parent Association?*
- Families decide how they want to be involved. They reach out to make sure all families take part in some way. Parents can use the phone, copier, fax, and computers. The family center is always full of parents. (**a, s, n**)
- 5) *Does the school openly discuss tough issues, like achievement gaps, racism and bullying?*
- Parents and teachers have study groups and do action research on issues like prejudice and tracking. Families are part of all major decisions. (**a, s, n**)