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New Teachers and the Culture Gap

Induction programs focus on reaching students from diverse backgrounds

By KRISTINA COWAN

As schools struggle to close the achievement gap, another gap has become a focus of induction programs for new teachers: the cultural gap that exists between many teachers and the students they are responsible for teaching.

Despite initiatives to increase the diversity of teachers in the United States, many do not share the same racial, ethnic, or cultural background as their students. According to the most recent figures available from the National Center for Education Statistics, 83 percent of teachers in U.S. public schools were white as of 2007–2008; while 56 percent of students were white, 21 percent were Hispanic, and 17 percent were black. Charter school teachers were only slightly more diverse: 73 percent were white, 12 percent were black, and 9 percent were Hispanic.

Meanwhile, public schools have become more segregated, studies show, meaning new teachers may be even less likely than their predecessors to have gone to school with students from different backgrounds.

"The problem is getting worse because school districts are resegregating," says Laura Cooper, who recently retired as assistant superintendent of Evanston Township High School , which is part of the Minority Student Achievement Network , a consortium of twenty-four school districts dedicated to raising the achievement of African American and Latino students.

"Many new teachers haven't had any personal relationships with people from other cultures. The only things they know are what they've read or seen on TV," explains Cooper. Moreover white people often assume they are the norm and that others are different; they don't think of themselves as having specifically "white beliefs" or cultural norms that are not shared with other racial or cultural groups, she says. Teachers who apply to Evanston for jobs are now told they will be expected to "be sensitive to and knowledgeable about who we are and who our students are" as a part of the school's newly written "core beliefs" statement.

Teachers who are not culturally responsive—who make inaccurate assumptions about students' interests and abilities or about how to connect with parents, for example—are at risk for harboring low expectations of students and failing to create the kind of relationships with students and families that have been linked by research to academic success, Cooper and other experts say.

Conversely, a culturally proficient teacher knows his or her students well enough to know the cultural attributes they bring to class, and responds and teaches to the strengths of those attributes, according to Drs. Franklin and Brenda CampbellJones, Cape Charles, Va.-based educational consultants and coauthors of *The Cultural Proficiency Journey: Moving Beyond Ethical Barriers Toward Profound School Change*.

While preservice programs may offer courses and training in multiculturalism, such theoretical background is only part of the equation. The other part is practice, which doesn't happen until teachers take their first job.

"When they finally have their own classrooms and groups of students, that's where the rubber hits the road," says Gene Thompson-Grove, director of professional development and special initiatives for the public schools of Brookline, Massachusetts. "They need to figure out a way to link theory with practice."

To help them, some school districts have expanded their induction and mentoring programs for new teachers to include a focus on becoming more culturally responsive. While these programs vary, they often seek to help teachers become more aware of their beliefs and cultural backgrounds through one-on-one and group support systems that allow for continued reflection and problem solving.

New teachers in Brookline, Mass., are not only required to participate in a two-day orientation with a special session on equity, race, and cultural competence, but are also paired with a mentor who meets with them weekly. Second- and third-year teachers participate in a Critical Friends Group (CFG), a peer-support group for sharing experiences and problems in the classroom. The mentors provide on-the-spot support around student and parent issues, while CFG groups provide time to analyze complex challenges of teaching. In both the mentoring meetings and in the CFGs, a special focus is on becoming more culturally responsive to students.

It was in a CFG that one teacher discovered why parents of students in her classroom weren't using a website and blog she had designed to promote more parent involvement. The teacher was frustrated and told her group that it seemed the parents weren't interested in their kids' education because they weren't participating in the website, says Thompson-Grove.

Through a protocol known as "peeling the onion," her peers worked hard to help the teacher consider her assumptions, even though it made the teacher uncomfortable, Thompson-Grove says. With their help, the teacher saw that her assumptions were flawed: The teacher thought the website was a useful tool, but because she hadn't asked the parents for their input, she didn't realize it wouldn't work for them. The teacher came away with a new plan of action to schedule 20-minute 'listening conferences' with parents—at a time and place convenient for them—to learn what they know about their children and ways of supporting them.

Laura West, a kindergarten teacher in Brookline, says: "CFG is one of the most meaningful things I do besides my teaching with children directly. . . . It's a safe space to help you figure things out that you don't know. And no one will ridicule you and say you're not a competent teacher."

In the Chicago Public Schools last year, mentors were assigned to about 1,100 first- and second-year teachers in an effort to help improve new teachers' effectiveness and increase the chances that they would continue teaching within CPS.

Stacy Stewart, a former CPS mentor who is now principal of Chicago's Belmont-Cragin Elementary School used a writers' workshop format to help new teachers reflect on their own cultural backgrounds and to encourage their students to do the same. Teachers drew pictures in a notebook to show what is important to them—their hopes, aspirations, family and friends. They then shared the notebooks with their students, and asked them to do the same thing. Based on the drawings, students discussed with teachers and classmates what topics they would write about. While the students worked on their writing skills, the teachers learned not only about their ability to write, but also about their cultures and the important people in their lives.

"It was amazing to see how the kids developed skills as writers and a stronger sense of community with the teacher and school," Stewart says. "It allowed the teachers to reflect on their own experiences and their teaching practices. And it allowed teachers to connect with students. It was very therapeutic."

Key to making these programs work is establishing a school culture where new teachers feel comfortable admitting what they don't know—or where they need help, experts say.

That was the idea behind a new group begun two years ago at Oak Park and River Forest High School in Oak Park, Illinois, a suburb outside downtown Chicago. Cofounded by Devon Alexander, an English teacher, and principal Nathaniel Rouse, the group is called "Courageous Conversations About Race," based on a book by the same name by Glenn E. Singleton and Curtis Linton. The twice-monthly meetings bring faculty and staff together from across the school, including new teachers, to create a safe space where participants can freely discuss sensitive issues.

The format has worked for David Bernthal, a science teacher who started at Oak Park in fall 2006. At a meeting last year, Bernthal, who is white, shared his thoughts about African American students who weren't performing well in his class. He assumed the students didn't care about succeeding, and that their parents provided no support, he remembers telling the group. This led him to have low expectations for the students, he confessed.

"I took a little risk, and then they responded positively and they responded encouragingly, and that helped create a safe environment for more people to speak up," Bernthal says.

Alexander says that as Bernthal became engaged in the group, "he started to understand how race and culture play out in himself and his students and the school as a whole. It just transformed how he is as a teacher."

Through the group discussions, Bernthal says he's become more aware of his students' different backgrounds, experiences, and family dynamics. "I am beginning to see, or least better imagine, how my students of color perceive the school," he says. " Many of these students may have a history of feeling like they aren't given a chance or are expected to fail. In light of this, I have made an effort to make students feel more comfortable with coming in outside of normal class time for help or to work on missing assignments."

Recently, Bernthal pursued an African American student who was missing some assignments that could have affected his eligibility for playing football. He gave him a pass to come to his classroom during lunchtime.

"He came and we had a chance to work through some of the questions that he had," Bernthal says. "He was appreciative. Additionally, he has seemed more confident in class and has produced work more consistently since our meeting. I have learned that my students of color may not be as likely to seek me out for help. However, this student and others have responded very positively when I take a specific interest in them. I hope to continue to practice this with as many students as I can."

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