Woven Traditions

~Beyond Diversity to Cultural Proficiency~ ©

Woven Traditions: Enhancing Cultural Competence in the Educational Setting: What is it? And, why is it important?

Many educational programs for youth attribute their successes to the characteristics of their staff members. (Bowie, and Bronte-Tinkew, 2006). In as much, ensuring the competence of staff as well as learners is essential for all educational programs. Past research has identified a number of core competencies for educational staff as well as learners focused on being *college* and *career* ready. These include professionalism and teamwork (National Youth Development Learning Network, 2006); however, the increasing racial and ethnic diversity of youth in America requires practitioners to add another competency to the list: cultural competency. This brief discusses the elements of cultural competence and its significance for out-of-school time programs. In addition, it provides suggestions to facilitators of learning for developing cultural competence and incorporating culturally competent activities into their existing curriculum (not an add-on) in order to benefit learners from a wide range of backgrounds.

Capturing Research-to-Results

This selected summary on research review is related to cultural competency training in education, cultural competency training for the workplace, and the connection of 'soft skills' and learner success. The intent behind the training for both educators and employees in the workplace is to help to create a climate of inclusion, respect, connection and caring. Cultural competency is necessary in our living, learning, and working environments. The training becomes embedded within one's profession where interpersonal relationships are built and fostered, and a learning and/or working community culture is developed.

Through the usage of the 21st Century Skills Cultural Competence Career Portfolio, 'soft skills' such as *Cultural Competence, Drive/Work Ethic, Communication, Collaboration, Teamwork, Decision Making and Problem- Solving, are introduced and focused on throughout the activities.*

What is Cultural Competence?

Cultural competence is the ability to work and respond in a manner that acknowledges and respects individuals' culturally-based beliefs, attitudes, behaviors, and customs. (Williams, 2001).

- Cultural competence is a skill that practitioners develop at both individual and organizational levels in order to work effectively with children, adolescents, and adults from diverse racial, ethnic, sexual, religious, and socioeconomic backgrounds.
- Cultural competence is not composed of merely attitudes or sensibilities; cultural competence is defined by actions and altered behaviors that accompany respectful misunderstanding.
- Developing cultural competence is a long-term process. (Messina, S., 1994). Accordingly, cultural competence cannot necessarily be achieved through compartmentalized instruction sessions or interventions – it must be honed through perpetual individual and institutional efforts in order to be effectively employed. (National Youth Development Learning Network, 2006).
- Practitioners in organizations seeking to develop cultural competence may find the "Cultural Competence Continuum" – Characteristics – developed by Did You Know Publishing, Inc. (adapted by the works of Terry Cross, Ph.D.), useful for determining appropriate programming which might be evolved in order to better serve multicultural populations. The continuum maps various skills and attributes of programs from "Cultural Destructiveness," which purposely acknowledges or allows only one way of being to, "Cultural Proficiency," which proactively promotes relationships among diverse groups while adapting to the shifting needs and differences of individuals and stakeholders.

Why work to achieve cultural competence in the educational setting?

- **Changes in the composition of the demographics in school settings today necessitate adaptable programming.** The United States has long been a center for diversity of ethnicity and experience, but the effects of the contemporary immigration boom have echoed through schools and community programs alike, compelling adjustments in the manner that educators and practitioners interact with and understand their learners. (National Youth Development Learning Network, 2006). Currently, more than 20 percent of children in the United States are born to immigrant parents, (Martin, et al., 2006) and as of the year of 2010, students of color (other than white) comprise a little more than 50 percent of children in K-12 public schools. (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). However, white, middle-class, English speakers will continue to make up the vast majority of teachers and childcare providers for at least the next several years. These circumstances, among others, compel facilitators of learning to develop authentic understandings of the cultural contexts in which youth reside and develop so that they

can plan their educational programs according to the risk and protective factors in children's backgrounds.

- **Culture and ethnicity are assets.** Cultural competence is especially important for facilitators' (of learning) conceptions of their learners. Culturally competent educators understand that, while risk factors are indeed associated with cultural and socio-demographic status, children's backgrounds are potential assets. For example, two studies examining drug use among African American and Puerto Rican adolescents found that knowledge of cultural history and ethnic identity diminished drug use. (Prevention Works!, 1999). Accordingly, it should not be assumed that acculturation is more important than maintaining a cultural identity.

- **The benefits to students who attend culturally competent schools are numerous.** Educational programs high in cultural competence are able to incorporate learners' ideas and values into their activities and structures. In turn, this collaboration with youth will serve to increase learners' enjoyment of programs and encourage their continued involvement and attendance. (The Connection Point: Youth Engagement Initiative, 2004). Learners who attend culturally competent schools which are culturally inclusive and whose staffers are culturally competent will be more likely to understand their own backgrounds and the backgrounds of others based on positive assets and the benefits of diversity. (Augustine, 2004). Moreover, culturally competent facilitators of learning will be more adept at adopting multicultural elements into their programming as opposed to employing only mono-cultural outlooks, which tend to disregard the value of diversity. Multicultural education has the potential to promote healthier psychosocial development for youth of all cultures throughout childhood and adolescence. (Woolfolk, 2004). Ultimately, youth will be better prepared to enter a multicultural workforce and society.

How does the Woven Traditions Curriculum build Cultural Competence in both education and in the workplace?

Both organizations and individuals can strive towards cultural competence through self-evaluation and perpetual adaptation. Incorporating activities and materials into existing educational programs that prompt learners and facilitators of learning to transcend their own cultural comfort levels will help individuals at all levels to communicate and develop more effectively. Below are examples how facilitators of learning build cultural competence by utilizing the Woven Traditions curriculum.

Gain knowledge about how your culture influences you. Many people have a tendency to view culture as something unique to others. In order to more fully understand one another, it is necessary to reflect on how culture influences you, as well as how it influences others.

- **How?** Time and self-reflection are critical ingredients for determining how your cultural background may influence your interactions with youth and families, but there are also concrete activities that either you or your educational program as a whole can do. One activity that can be completed as a group is to participate in a "breaking social norms" experiment. Individuals choose one behavior that is expected in their own society or culture and perform a (legal) action that goes against that behavior. After doing so, individuals then report back to the group on how it made them feel. Examples of this can include facing into an elevator, close talking, or sitting down with strangers in a public place. Breaking a social norm is one way to gain insight into how culturally-based behaviors and expectations influence comfort level and interactions.

Develop knowledge of other cultures that go beyond simplistic stereotypes and assessments. While stereotypes are common and may seem accurate, they can be debilitating in many situations.

- **How?** Surpass your stereotypes by becoming an active learner. Examine your own biases and ask questions, seek answers, and investigate assumptions in order to gain real awareness. Interact with learners and their families in their own neighborhoods and homes to meet them where they are most comfortable.

Open communication between yourself and the parents of your learners. Linguistic and cultural barriers can make communication difficult and can lead to misunderstandings and lack of interaction. Taking the first step towards opening communication is helpful for getting to know your learners and their families.

- **How?** Encourage parents' participation in the educational setting and engage them in conversations when they do participate. Research suggests that e-mail to parents directly or e-mail through youth to parents, as well as handouts translated into the languages of learners' parents can be useful tools for communicating with parents for whom English is not their first language. (Yang & McMullen, 2003).

For facilitating the process for the Cultural Competency Character Education Portfolio:

Acknowledge differences and affirm your commitments. Diversity, discrimination, and discomfort should not be taboo topics in educational settings.

- **How?** Ensure that staff is comfortable discussing divisive issues of race and culture through professional development and resources.

Encourage learners and adults from varied backgrounds to collaborate to reach common goals. Encouraging learners to work together is the most effective way to ensure the development of inter-cultural relationships. (Weber, 2004).

- **How?** Engage children and adolescents in "Project-Based Education." (The Connection Point: Youth Engagement Initiative, 2004). This format goes beyond "fun activities" and

encourages learners to collaborate on social service programs that are important to them and helpful to their communities. By involving learners in projects that demand collaboration across cultures, they will not only learn to work as a team with those who are different from themselves, but they will also experience successes in aiding their communities. (The Connection Point: Youth Engagement Initiative, 2004).

Include educational leaders and facilitators of learning from a variety of backgrounds.

- **How?** Establish mentoring relationships between adults and students. (The Connection Point: Youth Engagement Initiative, 2004) and (Jekielek, Moore, Hair, and Scarupa, 2002) Bring in speakers and visitors from the community, and find volunteers or pay employees from various cultural, ethnic, racial, sexual, linguistic, and religious backgrounds or orientations to raise cultural competence for staff and learners.

Conduct evaluations and hold your school accountable.

- **How?** Examine how the social, demographic, and economic make-up of your school reflects that of your community and state. This will provide you with the knowledge of how learners fit within and experience their immediate educational environment based on their culture.
- In addition, your school can conduct small-scale confidential surveys of your learners to find out whether they are comfortable in their school, with their peers, and with staff members, so that you can understand whether and which groups are benefiting, and which groups may be marginalized.

Cultural Competence helps to build Quality Leaders in the Workplace

Early diversity training (circa 1980's and 1990's and even still some today) focused on making leaders more aware and more sensitive to differences. Leaders left training sessions perhaps with a better understanding of inequities and disparities that have historically existed between and among those who for a variety of reasons were labeled as "minorities" and/or "disadvantaged" in our society (i.e., racial and ethnic minorities, people with disabilities, LGBT citizens, etc.). However, this training usually left leaders feeling either guilty, angry or frustrated with little specific direction as to how to lead differently. It did not teach them the skills that were needed to lead a multicultural workforce.

A focus on awareness and sensitivity implies that there is a group that needs to be more sensitive towards other groups. In this case heterosexual white men as the dominant group needed to be more aware of the issues of non-dominant groups. The framing naturally set up an "us and them" situation. When we frame diversity education as a competency, it is easy to support the idea that everybody, not just heterosexual white men, need to be more culturally competent for organizational success in our fast moving, global multicultural world.

While everyone needs to be more culturally competent, a larger burden is placed on leaders to develop these skills because they are in positions of power that can impact outcomes for those that they lead.

If leaders are not able to discern patterns of cultural difference in their own and other cultures, their interpretations of behaviors may lead to erroneous decisions.

Why Leaders Should 'Boost' Their Cross-Cultural Leadership: *LeadershipWatch (2013)*

1. Millions of dollars can be suddenly at stake because of unexpected, and often unintentional, cultural misunderstandings. That's the first good reason for examining and sharpening your own cross-cultural leadership skills. Today's business leaders are increasingly facing challenges that are directly related to cross-cultural differences. If one is able to reconcile these differences, one can accelerate success. If one does not, unexpected behavior, resistance and conflicts could seriously hinder one's success.

2. One's ability to move people from 'knowing we are different' to 'knowing how to work together, despite cultural differences' is crucial to building successful collaboration across cultures and companies. Research shows that this is in turn increases creativity and innovation). (Harvard Business School former faculty member, Roy Chua).

3. Chances that you will, somewhere along the road, have to lead people and teams from cultures that are not your own have never been as high. Your ability to lead, motivate, and inspire people across cultures is no longer a 'nice to have', but has become a crucial competency for leaders in today's international business environment.

The Importance of 'Soft Skills' in the Workplace:

When it comes to skills in employment, the first line of emphasis is typically towards abilities, training and knowledge of specific skill sets. These are referred to as 'hard skills.' 'Soft skills' are often overlooked, but they also play an important role in day-to-day operations. Companies/business owners should place equal importance on 'hard' and 'soft skills' during the hiring process for new employees. In addition, current employees should be encouraged to develop 'soft skills' if they are lacking in this area.

According to the 2007 *Every Promise, Every Child: Turning Failure into Action* report, a large percentage of young people preparing to enter the workforce over the next two decades are significantly lacking the "soft" or applied skills – such as cultural competence, good character traits, teamwork, decision-making, and communication – that will help them become effective employees and managers. In addition, in a Job Outlook 2008 survey conducted by the National Association of Colleges & Employers (NACE), the top characteristics looked for in new hires by 276 employer respondents were all 'soft skills': communication ability, a strong work ethic, initiative, interpersonal skills, and teamwork. Lastly, the Indiana Business Research Center

(IBRC) found that while credentials (degrees and certificates) are important, it is the development of 'soft skills' (those that are more social than technical) that is critical to developing a **strong, vibrant workforce**.

Interestingly, research also suggests that 'soft skills' are not just important for first-time employees. According to a poll released in June 2008 by the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM), many workplace 'soft skills' have become more important for the experienced professional. These skills include cultural competence, critical thinking/problem solving, leadership, professionalism/work ethic, teamwork/collaboration, and adaptability/flexibility.

According to the National Collaborative for Workforce and Disability for Youth (NCWD/Youth), the development of 'soft skills' is identified as a critical component for success in activities such as civic participation and youth leadership in addition to school- and work-based learning experiences. The *Guideposts for Success*, developed by NCWD/Youth in collaboration with its funding agency, the U.S. Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP), clearly indicate the need for all youth to have exposure to training focusing on job seeking and workplace basic skills.

To further explore this important issue, ODEP convened a group of distinguished U.S. businesses in 2007. During the discussion, participating companies identified the following competencies as key to the success of young workers: Communication; Networking; Enthusiasm and Attitude; Teamwork; Problem Solving and Critical Thinking; and Professionalism. It was at this meeting that the leaders at ODEP thought materials should be made available to youth service professionals to assist them as they prepare all youth, including youth with disabilities, for employment.

Building on that dialogue, the activities within the Woven Traditions 21st Century Skills Cultural Competence Career Portfolio were created to provide an introduction to the "basics" of 'soft skills.' These materials have been designed with youth service professionals in mind – specifically those working with in-school and out-of-school youth, ages 3 to 21, on career and workforce readiness skills. The basic foundation for the structure of these activities includes convenience, cost-effectiveness, and creativity. They were designed in such a way as to be easily incorporated into current programming and/or already established curricula.

'Soft skills' cannot be taught in a vacuum nor can they be acquired simply because the goal of a lesson plan indicates it shall be so. Rather, they must be introduced, developed, refined, practiced, and reinforced. Did You Know Publishing, Inc., is committed to providing resources regarding 'soft skills' in a way that is useful, creative, hands-on and fundamentally beneficial for all types of youth programs, and thus, all types of learners. The contents of the Woven Traditions 21st Century Skills Cultural Competence Career Portfolio reflect that commitment.

Final Thoughts:

Culture is defined in numerous ways across settings, disciplines, and the media, but the overarching theme is one that emphasizes a core set of values, customs, and interpersonal styles that influence individuals' behavior. However, while learners in one school do belong to certain groups, many may not belong to any one culture. (Woolfolk, 2004). Therefore, schools have the opportunity not only to model cultural competence and value multiculturalism but also to impart these increasingly important skills and values on to their learners. Educating 21st century learners is the first step towards socializing children to be socially conscious, open-minded community members and quality leaders in the workforce. 'Soft skills' predict success in life and programs that enhance 'soft skills' have an important place in an effective portfolio of public policies.

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