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Accounting for Cultural, Racial, and Other Significant Individual and Group Differences

(http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/practicenotes/accounting.pdf)

A ll schools must consider significant individual and group differences. Diversity of stakeholders is a reality at schools. This has benefits and produces problems. With respect to the latter, direct or indirect accusations that "You don't understand" are common and valid. Indeed, they are givens. After all, few of us fully understand complex situations or what others have experienced and are feeling.

However, accusing someone of not understanding creates barriers to working relationships. After all, the intent of such accusations is to make others uncomfortable and put them on the defensive. Avoidance of "You don't understand" accusations is one way to reduce barriers to establishing productive working relationships.

More generally, discussions of diversity and cultural competence provide a foundation for accounting for such differences. For example, a guide for enhancing cultural competence (developed by the Family Youth Services Bureau of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services) cautions:

> Racism, bigotry, sexism, religious discrimination, homophobia, and lack of sensitivity to the needs of special populations continue to affect the lives of each new generation. Powerful leaders and organizations throughout the country continue to promote the exclusion of people who are "different," resulting in the disabling by-products of hatred, fear, and unrealized potential. ... We will not move toward diversity until we promote inclusion ... Programs will not accomplish any of (their) central missions unless ... (their approach reflects) knowledge, sensitivity, and a willingness to learn.

The document outlines baseline assumptions that we broaden to read as follows:

- Those who work with youngsters and their families can better meet the needs of their target population by enhancing their own competence with respect to group and intragroup differences.

- Developing such competence is a dynamic, on-going process B not a goal or outcome. That is, no single activity or event will enhance such competence. In fact, use of a single activity reinforces a false sense that the "problem is solved."

- Diversity training is widely viewed as important, but is not effective in isolation. Programs should avoid the "quick fix" theory of providing training without follow-up or more concrete management and programmatic changes.

- Hiring staff from the same background as the target population does not necessarily ensure the provision of appropriate services, especially when these personnel are not in decision-making positions, or are not themselves appreciative of, or respectful to, group and intragroup differences.

- Establishing a process for enhancing a program's competence with respect to group and intragroup differences is an opportunity for positive organizational and individual growth.

In the end, of course, remember that individual differences are the most fundamental determinant of whether a good intervention fit and working relationship are established.

Mason, Benjamin, and Lewis (1996) outline five cultural competence values that should be reflected in staff attitude and practice and an organization's policy and structure. The emphasis is more on behavior than awareness and sensitivity. The following are the five values and the authors' description of each:

(1) Valuing Diversity -- framing cultural diversity as a strength of clients, line staff, administrative personnel, board members, and volunteers.

(2) Conducting Cultural Self-Assessment -- awareness of cultural blind spots and ways in which one's values and assumptions may differ from those held by clients.

(3) Understanding the Dynamics of Difference -- the ability to understand what happens when people of different cultural backgrounds interact.

(4) Incorporating Cultural Knowledge -- an ongoing process.

(5) Adapting to Diversity -- modifying direct interventions and the way the organization is run to reflect the contextual realities of a given catchment area and the sociopolitical forces that may have shaped those who live in the area.

Finally, don't forget to consider youth cultural subgroups. In this respect, see the Center's series *Youth Subcultures: Understanding Subgroups to Better Address Barriers to Learning & Improve Schools* – http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/materials/trainingpresentation.htm#fact

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Mason, J, Benjamin, M.P. & Lewis, S.A. (1996). The cultural competence model. In C.A. Heflinger & C.T. Nixon (Eds), *Families and the mental health system for children and adolescence*. CA: Sage Publications.

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (1994). *A guide to enhancing the cultural competence of runaway and homeless youth programs*. [Washington, DC]: Family and Youth Services Bureau, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

See Center Quick Find on *Cultural Competence and Related Issues*
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/culturecomp.htm

For Cultural Competence Websites focused on Mental Health, see
http://www.nyc.gov/html/doh/downloads/pdf/qi/qi-ccpriority-resources.pdf