

A hand is shown from the bottom, holding a black camera lens. The lens has a white scale with markings for feet (ft) and meters (m). The background is dark with numerous out-of-focus, colorful circular lights in shades of orange, yellow, blue, and green, creating a bokeh effect.

A CULTURALLY PROFICIENT LENS

Five essential elements to achieve cultural proficiency and to ensure success for English-learning students.

By Reyes Quezada, Delores Lindsey, and Randall Lindsey

This article
is the second in a series
focused on supporting
English-language learners.

There's nothing wrong with the kids." Those words, spoken by New York University sociologist Pedro Noguera, encapsulate the belief that educators must embrace to effectively educate English-learning students. For far too long, English-learning students have existed in the margins. Educators must value students' diverse backgrounds, instead of perceiving their language background as a troublesome obstacle.

The 2010 U.S. census reported that English learners comprise 10 percent of the total K-12 student enrollment in U.S. schools. In California alone, the English learner enrollment for 2010 was reported at more than 1.5 million, representing 24.7 percent of the total student enrollment for that state.

Serving the educational needs of English-learning students has become a challenge for many schools, especially as educators grapple with stringent assessment and accountability measures and closing the achievement gap.

This article offers principals a set of tools, grounded in a belief system of cultural proficiency, that can help

them move a school forward by honoring the assets that students bring with them each day.

Capitalizing on Cultural Assets

Educators who subscribe to the cultural proficiency belief system view students' cultural backgrounds of language, race, gender, and socioeconomic status as assets to construct educational experiences. Cultural proficiency forms the foundation for curriculum, instruction, assessment, and leadership that values and responds to students' cultures. This belief in all students' ability to learn requires educators to be aware of how their assumptions inform their individual values and behaviors.

As instructional leaders, principals must think about language diversity in a broad, inclusive manner and using the lens of cultural proficiency. The first step is to reflect on one's own values and behaviors, and on the school's policies and practices that affect English-learning students. This step includes developing a culture of willingness, openness, and a schoolwide commitment to embracing and meeting the challenges and opportunities of cultural and language diversity.

Culturally proficient schools are devoted to uncovering the manner in which assumptions systemically—often without conscious intent—inform current educational policies and practices. This means that educators strive to remove institutional barriers that get in the way of student learning and confront policies that have been in place for extended periods of time. These practices often go unexamined because, "That's the way we do things around here," or "We've always done it that way." These procedures can reflect a school's resistance to change, and the leader's ignorance of the need to adapt to shifting demographics. Some of the barriers that principals must confront and dismantle are:

- Curricular and co-curricular images that do not reflect current students in the school community;
- Inflexible class grouping assignments that do not reflect the school demographics; and
- Special education classes that disproportionately reflect the newer populations of students, especially English-learning students.

To successfully educate English-learning students, schools must develop long-term approaches to professional development and resist overreliance on discrete, short-term instructional strategies. Long-term instructional strategies for acquiring English must be learned, coached, and applied in a supportive context. Such learning must take place where educators share two beliefs that are prerequisites to successful teaching and learning:

- Teachers, and the administrators and counselors who support these teachers, believe they can learn to teach English-learning students, and
- English-learning students deserve high-quality instruction.

When these beliefs are in place, educators are equipped to use a

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Find strategies from Brown University's Education Alliance for Teaching Diverse Learners, including **culturally responsive teaching**.

The National Education Association hosts an informative **video on the importance of cultural competence**, accompanied by useful links and resources.

curricular and instructional model for English learners that is appropriate to their needs.

Cultural Proficiency Principles

Given the growing numbers of English-learning students, school principals, educators, and district officials must strengthen their cultural proficiency knowledge and skills. Effective culturally relevant teaching reaffirms three basic principles:

1. All English-learning students can learn. This belief is evidence of moving beyond negative stereotypes toward cultural competence.
2. There are particular teaching and learning challenges faced by English-learning students. Recognizing this concept is foundational to basic multicultural education strategies.
3. The language and cultural experiences of English-learning students and their families should be incorporated into the curriculum. This is vital to creating culturally proficient classrooms, schools, and districts.

As educators work to strengthen their cultural proficiency, they can periodically evaluate their place along a cultural proficiency continuum that indicates unique ways of seeing and responding to difference. In our book, *Culturally Proficient Practice: Supporting Educators of English Learning Students*, we provide language for describing both healthy and nonproductive policies, practices, and individual behaviors.

Cultural Proficiency Continuum

- **Cultural Destructiveness**—Seeking to eliminate references to the culture of “others” in all aspects of the school and in relationship with their communities.
- **Cultural Incapacity**—Trivializing other English-learning communities

and seeking to make them appear to be wrong.

- **Cultural Blindness**—Pretending not to see or acknowledge the socioeconomic status and culture of English-learning communities and choosing to ignore the experiences of such groups within the school and community.
- **Cultural Precompetence**—Increasingly aware of what you and the school don't know about working with English-learning communities. At this key level of development, you and the school can move in a positive, constructive direction. Or you can vacillate, stop, and possibly regress.
- **Cultural Competence**—Manifesting your personal values and behaviors and the school's policies and practices in a manner that is inclusive to English-learning cultures and socioeconomic communities that are new or different from you and the school majority.
- **Cultural Proficiency**—Advocating for life-long learning for the purpose of being increasingly effective in serving the educational needs of various socioeconomic and English-learning cultural groups. Culturally proficient school leaders hold the vision that they and their school are instruments for creating a socially just democracy.

Five Elements of Cultural Proficiency

Culturally proficient principals take into account the five essential elements of cultural proficiency for including and supporting English-learning students. They further implement specific culturally proficient practices for each element.

1. **Assess Cultural Knowledge**—Principals initiate learning about

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their own and others' culture(s) as assets for making changes that benefit underserved students.

Practices: Culturally proficient principals advocate for linguistically and culturally diverse students' success by engaging with families, communities, and agencies as partners in the education of all students.

2. **Value Diversity**—Principals are inclusive of people and cultures with viewpoints and experiences different from their own for the benefit of their school and community. **Practices:** Principals promote and develop mechanisms for creating a socially just school, with particular emphasis on linguistically and culturally diverse students. They continuously engage educators and parents in all aspects of their school community to collaborate on common goals and share resources.

For example, they hold school and community meetings in neighborhoods where English-learning students live. They also enhance access of opportunity and eliminate achievement gaps. This can be accomplished by hosting after-school and weekend programs with local institutions, such as libraries, and paying particular attention to linguistically and culturally diverse students.

3. **Manage the Dynamics of Difference**—Principals use problem-solving and conflict resolution strategies as ways to include multiple perspectives and to teach others about the dynamics of cultural interactions.

Practices: Principals resolve issues that occur between cultures, both within the school and between the school and its diverse communities, such as misunderstandings about school procedures and expectations. Principals also deepen school and community knowledge of educational challenges experienced by linguistically and culturally diverse students and their families. These include translation needs and migrant family work schedules.

Finally, principals actively address and resolve issues English-learning students confront, just as they would any other student group.

4. **Adapt to Diversity**—Principals use their cultural knowledge to guide school policies that achieve equitable educational and socially just outcomes.


Practices: Culturally proficient leaders find ways to meet the needs of all students, paying particular attention to linguistically and culturally diverse students. These principals help parents—and the school community—understand opportunity and achievement data.

They consider divergent and often conflicting points of view regarding topics such as student grouping for instruction and using curricular materials that represent students. They also challenge local practices, such as length of time students are in language development classrooms and lack of qualified instructional staff.

5. **Institutionalize Cultural Knowledge**—Principals' cultural knowledge is evident in their behavior, as well as in school policies that address educational inequities and close access, opportunity, and achievement gaps.

Practices: Culturally proficient principals advocate for equitable practices. For example, they use data to understand student needs, make sure that translation services are available when needed, and encourage both written and visual communication during home visits.

Improving Lives

A primary purpose of education today is to improve the lives of all students through culturally proficient teaching and learning. Culturally proficient schools are well positioned to foster an environment where teachers and all learners can do their best thinking and learning. To accomplish cultural proficiency, schools will need strong leadership from principals. 

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