

7-2021

## Cultural Proficiency: The Necessary Link to Family Engagement

Corinne Brion

University of Dayton, cbrion1@udayton.edu

Follow this and additional works at: [https://ecommons.udayton.edu/eda\\_fac\\_pub](https://ecommons.udayton.edu/eda_fac_pub)



Part of the [Educational Assessment, Evaluation, and Research Commons](#), [Educational Leadership Commons](#), and the [Higher Education Administration Commons](#)

---

### eCommons Citation

Brion, Corinne, "Cultural Proficiency: The Necessary Link to Family Engagement" (2021). *Educational Leadership Faculty Publications*. 271.

[https://ecommons.udayton.edu/eda\\_fac\\_pub/271](https://ecommons.udayton.edu/eda_fac_pub/271)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of Educational Leadership at eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Educational Leadership Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of eCommons. For more information, please contact [mschlangen1@udayton.edu](mailto:mschlangen1@udayton.edu), [ecommons@udayton.edu](mailto:ecommons@udayton.edu).

# **Cultural Proficiency: The Necessary Link to Family Engagement**

Corinne Brion, University of Dayton

## **Abstract**

Although family engagement is crucial to student and community outcomes, schools often alienate families who are not part of the dominant culture. As a result, school leaders need to become culturally proficient to systematically engage all families equitably regardless of their race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status and other cultural identifiers. This teaching case study raises issues related to cultural proficiency and family engagement. To help current and future educational leaders foster family engagement, I provide a cultural proficiency for family and community engagement framework. I also pose questions designed to trigger conversations and find practical solutions related to equitable family engagement.

Keywords: Educational leadership, cultural proficiency, PK-12, family engagement, diversity.

## **Introduction**

This teaching case study aims to demonstrate how crucial it is for principals to be culturally proficient in order to equitably engage families in schools and create robust family-school partnerships. This teaching case study is relevant to practicing and prospective principals and administrators because it raises issues related to equitable family engagement. Specifically, this scenario addresses challenges that occurred between a school leader and parents with various cultural backgrounds due to the principal's lack of cultural proficiency. Despite the popular saying, "it takes a village to raise a child," schools often alienate parents, families, and community members. By not inviting all stakeholders to be part of the conversation and the

decision-making process, families become disconnected from their children's schools, administration, and teachers. When schools do not welcome all families, students lose out on learning opportunities because families from diverse cultural backgrounds can provide genuine learning experiences to students and the school's staff and faculty (Clark-Louque et al., 2019; Lindsey et al., 2018; Wells et al., 2016). To serve all students and families equitably, there is an urgent need for culturally proficient leaders who can support students and families from various cultures equitably.

Scholars such as Boske et al. (2017) contended that by 2042 "communities of color will become the majority of the U.S. population with Latino and black populations comprising 45% of the 2060 U.S. population" (p. 361). In the United States, one in four students speak a language other than English at home, and the majority of these students are learning English as a second language in school. In California, 44% of school-age (5-17) children speak a foreign language at home. In Texas, Nevada, New Jersey, New York and Florida, these students represent one third of the student population (Zeigler & Camarota, 2018). Additionally, ongoing political and economic instability combined with natural disasters continues to displace many people around the globe. Historically, the United States has welcomed large numbers of immigrant and refugee families (Zong & Batalova, 2017). As a result, American public schools are serving a more heterogeneous student and parent population now than ever before (Holme & Finnegan, 2018; Kugler, 2017). These cultural variations present theoretical, philosophical, and practical challenges to suburban school leaders and teachers in particular because the majority of educators in suburban areas are not as accustomed as urban leaders to work with students and families from diverse cultures (Wells et al., 2016). As a result, and despite the increase of racial, language, religious, and ethnic diversity in suburban places (Holme & Finnegan, 2018; Kugler,

2017), there are students who fall into the crack, frustrated teachers, and alienated families (Roy & Roxas, 2011; Wells et al., 2016).

The National Educational Leadership Preparation (NELP) standards specify what novice leaders and program graduates are expected to do in their schools (NPBEA, 2018). Regarding equity, NELP now calls for educational leaders to be equitable and culturally proficient. NELP also expect leaders to engage community and external leadership. Standard 3 reads:

Equity, Inclusiveness, and Cultural Responsiveness— Candidates who successfully complete a building-level educational leadership preparation program understand and demonstrate the capacity to promote the current and future success and well-being of each student and adult by applying the knowledge, skills, and commitments necessary to develop and maintain a supportive, equitable, culturally responsive, and inclusive school culture” (p.77).

On family engagement, standard 5 states:

Candidates who successfully complete a building-level educational leadership preparation program understand and demonstrate the capacity to promote the current and future success and well-being of each student and adult by applying the knowledge, skills, and commitments necessary to engage families, community, and school personnel in order to strengthen student learning, support school improvement, and advocate for the needs of their school and community.

Thanks to NELP, more and more leadership preparation programs promote cultural proficiency, equity, and family engagement by offering courses such as ethics, cultural foundations, and social justice (Marshall & Olivia, 2006; McCarthy, 2015). If educational leaders continually work towards being culturally proficient, they will over time alter their

students, families, and communities' mindsets, reactions and actions. As new generations of students benefit from a more inclusive education, they will model and formally or informally teach cultural proficiency to others.

In this case study, I provide a cultural proficiency framework to engage families equitably. It is my hope in that current and future leaders will use this framework to guide their work towards cultural proficiency and equitable family engagement while satisfying NELP standards 3 and 5. Before presenting the case, I provide background information that will help current and future educational leaders understand the issues at hand. Teaching notes follow to assist in answering the questions and completing the activity.

### **Background Information**

In this section, I present some contextual information about the community, school, and principal. To describe the community, the school district, and the school itself, I used pseudonyms. This teaching case study is based on a combination of facts and hypotheticals.

#### **The community**

The city of Redford is located in a northern state of the United States. A small sized city, Redford has a population of 60,000 and has had little racial diversity historically. The city was founded in the early 1800s by White European settlers who crossed the Atlantic to escape the famines in Scotland and Ireland. Unlike many other parts of the United States, the census indicates that there has been an increase in the youth population. This influx in the community has increased support for building two new schools in Redford. These schools have created jobs and started to attract more people from surrounding areas. As a result, the schools have grown in racial, religious, language, and socioeconomic diversity. The city has a lot to offer including a

low crime rate, affordable cost of living, and a few industries. The economy of the city and region depends on a nearby military base, a growing healthcare sector, and the agriculture industry.

### **Redford school district (RSD)**

RSD serves 6,400 students from Kindergarten to 12<sup>th</sup> grade. The district has five elementary schools, one middle school, and one high school. The Redford Early Childhood Center serves Kindergarten through 1<sup>st</sup> grade for the entire district. That center alone has an enrollment of 1,500 students. The five elementary schools serve approximately a total of 1,800 students while the middle school and high school educate 1,500 and 1,600 students respectively. The vision statement states: “The Redford school district aims at providing students with diverse opportunities, inspiring creativity and critical thinking through excellent teaching, supporting student cultures, and engaging parents and community members in the life of the district and its schools.”

Mr. Cox, a White middle-aged man, has been the superintendent of RSD for 10 years. Based on the vision statement, Mr. Cox hired consultants to conduct a survey that would be used for the district’s strategic planning efforts. Survey results indicated that the district needed to augment family engagement, support people from various cultures, maintain the district’s facilities, and provide state-of-the-art technology in schools. It has been three years since the results of the survey were shared on the district webpage. To date, no additional information is available on the status of the plan to increase family engagement and cultural competency. The only information available on the website pertains to maintenance of the facilities.

Mr. Cox, however, listened to the consultant’s recommendations and partnered with the Redford Educational Service Center to provide equity training for the district’s principals and

three teachers in each school. The selected individuals have been training for two years with various equity coaches. The Equity Program aims at providing knowledge and practical tools related to equity issues to school teams in the Redford community. The primary goals of this initiative are to augment equitable family engagement and support families and students from various cultures in RSD schools. A secondary goal includes using data to address academic discrepancies among various student groups.

### **Redford elementary school (RES)**

RES was built in 1969 and renovated in 2005. It is the educational home of 400 students in grades 2-6. RES is the most racially, linguistically, religiously, and socioeconomically diverse elementary school in the district. Racial diversity is as followed: 25 % of the students are African American, 10% are Hispanic, 10% are from other ethnicities, and 55% are White. Fifty percent of the students qualify for free or reduced lunch, which means that children from families with incomes at or below the poverty line are eligible for free meals on each school day. RES has 20 teachers (four males and 16 females), two female administrators, two janitors, four teacher assistants, one English language teacher, and one nurse. Ninety-five percent of the teachers are White and considered middle class.

### **The principal**

RES is under the leadership of Mrs. Martin, an experienced leader who has been in the district for 25 years as a teacher and administrator. She taught at RES for 15 years before becoming its principal 10 years ago. Mrs. Martin, who is White, frequently told the superintendent that she needed training because her “school was becoming more diverse.” Mrs. Martin and three of her teachers have been part of the Equity Program for the last two years. Mrs. Martin was born and raised in the Redford school district where she still resides. She is in

her 50s and has an obvious passion for education. She is a fervent supporter of teachers and students. Mrs. Martin is a lifelong learner and is always willing to help others learn. She belongs to professional organizations, is a mentor to new principals, and loves to read. Mrs. Martin is a popular principal among teachers and students because of her big heart and determination to educate all students.

### **The case**

One Friday morning in February, the front page of the *Redford Tribune* read, “RES under scrutiny for racial discrimination.” The newspaper story revealed that the ongoing efforts to improve race-related disparities in Redford schools got sidetracked by a letter from RES that angered some parents of African American students. Mrs. Martin and her equity team had copied and sent a survey that the local middle school had successfully used. At the middle school, the leadership team received useful feedback from African American parents on what teachers should know about their children, including their strengths and struggles, as well as their overall impressions of the school. Mrs. Martin thought such a survey would benefit her school. She decided to send the same survey to a few African American parents with whom she had a good relationship. While the middle school principal provided contextual information and had conversations with parents prior to sending the survey, Mrs. Martin sent the survey without any explanation or background information.

One of the questions on the survey asked, “What do you wish your White teachers knew about your Black child?” This question created an immediate uproar. Parents felt hurt, betrayed, and discriminated against. Although Mrs. Martin spent the following weekend and evenings calling upset parents to explain her intentions and apologize, parents’ dissatisfaction grew exponentially after the delivery of the survey. The media grabbed hold of the story and



broadcasted daily negative messages about the school on the local news programs and in newspapers.

On the second day, the superintendent addressed the TV stations and the *Redford Tribune*:

We're owning the fact that there should have been more context. Once we talked to parents when they called, they understood what the district was trying to do. In this situation, the wording was not good, and we are not trying to hide from that.

The issue drew hundreds of Facebook and Twitter comments on parents' pages. Some called the letter offensive or racist, others said the district was trying to do a good thing and parents should help educators understand their cultural differences.

Mrs. Aber, a Redford parent, said she was completely taken aback when she first stumbled across the White teachers/Black children question on Facebook: "My first reaction was 'This is fake.' I sent a message to my kids' school and the principal called me back and apologized." Although, Mrs. Aber supported conversations about racial and cultural issues in Redford schools, she thought this survey was, "culturally insensitive, poorly worded, and detrimental to fostering family engagement." Other parents stated their discontent. One mother shared:

I do not believe we have room for that in an educational system. I am surprised we are just now focusing on cultural diversity. The school may mean well, but it is always parents from cultural background that are different from the norm who get targeted and our kids who get the short end of the stick.

As a result of the survey, Mrs. Martin and her equity team organized a forum for parents to come to the school and express their feelings and concerns. The gym was full of families from various

cultures. RES teachers were present as well as teachers and leaders from other schools in the district. The superintendent also attended. Mr. Carpenter, the Equity Program's lead coach, started the meeting by explaining that equity work is messy and hard. He stated, "We are all learning and I can assure you that Mrs. Martin and her team only had good intentions. They have been working on equity for two years and are dedicated to make this school an equitable institution where all kids thrive." Mr. Carpenter continued by explaining the goals of the Equity Program. He ended his speech by stating, "Thanks to the Equity Program, Mrs. Martin and her team are having conversations about cultural proficiency, biases and doing the hard work to ensure that the school is more equitable." During Mr. Carpenter's speech, Mrs. Martin remained silent at the back of the gym.

When it came time for the Q&A portion of the forum, parents had many questions and concerns related to the school's strategic plan and specifically questioned the goal related to involving all families equitably in the school's life. One representative of the Parent Teacher Association (PTA) shared:

How can we be partners in our children's education if we are not aware of anything? We did not even know the district and this school participated in the Equity Program. Nothing is shared with us despite the consultant's report stating that the district as a whole needed to boost family engagement. What happened to that? I wonder if I just do not receive information because I immigrated from Honduras and my English is not so good. We could have this kind of forum to collaboratively work together for the sake of our children instead of spending this time damaging already strained family-school relationships.

Other parents expressed distrust in Mrs. Martin because of the lack of communication and what they perceived as a lack of respect for all parents. Marla, an African American mother expressed the sentiment of the group when she said:

Excuse me, but this meeting has been going on for one hour and the principal has not apologized to us. This is how you should have started the meeting, Mrs. Martin. We are always told we are a family, but the truth is that you do not treat us parents as a family. What you sent was offensive and, in my mind, racist and culturally biased. It implied that our families of color and children are less-than.

Following this last criticism, Mrs. Martin took the floor and said, “I am very sorry. I can assure you that this survey came from a place of love. I love your children.”

The meeting concluded late in the evening. Parents had an opportunity to be heard but confusion remained. The last comment pertained to not knowing why only some parents received this survey. One parent spoke up:

My child, for example, is an A student, so why would I need to receive a survey? Perhaps the media is right; this is culturally inappropriate. We parents who do not fit the norm, whether we are gay, speak a different native tongue, are from a different racial background, are being discriminated against and excluded. Should we possibly fight further with a lawsuit? It is just sad to see the parents who complain tonight are the cultural minorities. I am just observing and reflecting on that.

The climate and culture of the school changed for the worse after families received the survey. Mrs. Martin lost the trust of many parents. The principal struggled in her daily tasks and considered resigning because of her stress level, lack of sleep, and persistently feeling that she

had betrayed the school community. The following teaching notes provide information on how cultural proficiency fosters family engagement.

### **Teaching notes**

To help current and future educational leaders foster family engagement, the teaching notes provide a cultural proficiency for family and community engagement framework. The teaching notes will assist educational leaders in answering the questions and activity. In this teaching case study, although Mrs. Martin had good intentions, she unintentionally alienated many families because she lacked cultural proficiency. The principal sent a letter to the African American families in her community with the aim of getting to know her students better in order to more adequately serve them. However, despite her good intentions, the impact of her actions produced a negative outcome. Families lost the trust they had in the principal and teachers. The following information will help current and future leaders further their understanding on how to use cultural proficiency to equitably engage families in schools. The cultural proficiency framework for family and community engagement (Clark-Louque et al., 2019) provides school leaders with a practical model to guide their work towards cultural proficiency and equitable family engagement.

The premise for culturally proficient leadership is that "We are all embedded in our respective cultures, and our responses to individuals and groups relate to our learning in very specific cultural contexts" (Khazzaka, 1997, p. 121). Culturally proficient leadership is a mindset, not about knowing everything about every single culture (Lindsey et al., 2018). Rather, it is about being willing to learn about other cultures, being willing to make mistakes and recognizing them, being humble by practicing cultural humility, seeking to understand, and

being inclusive in our words and practices (Lindsey et al., 2018). According to Clark-Louque et al. (2019), culturally proficient leaders:

Proactively reach out to the various cultures served by their school and help their colleagues recognize, honor, and embrace the funds of knowledge and the cultural capital of each cultural group that composes the community served by the school (p.30).

Cultural proficiency for family and community engagement (Clark-Louque et al., 2019) recognizes that family engagement is key to promote student success and well-being. In this model, culturally proficient leaders understand that they can only care for the child and his/her family if they understand what it is like to be part of the family's culture. Leaders need to comprehend what it is like to be part of a culture that has been marginalized, to not speak the dominant language, or to sleep in a shelter every night. These culturally proficient leaders are committed to educating all students and engaging all families. They value students' and families' cultures, languages, and learning styles. They continually learn and advocate for marginalized groups. The cultural proficiency for family and community engagement framework (Clark-Louque et al., 2019) is comprised of 7 Cs that function as support concepts to cultivate robust school-family partnerships. The 7 Cs are comprised of collaboration, communication, caring/compassion, culture, community, connectedness, collective responsibility, and courageous engagement (Clark-Louque et al., 2019).

**Collaboration:** In culturally, inclusive, and collaborative relationships, family feel safe to participate in meetings, decision making, and school reform. The leader of the school fosters respectful dialogue and interaction while also building a sense of belonging for families to feel safe, welcomed, and valued. Culturally proficient leaders foster trust among stakeholders and focus on promoting a culture of collaboration amongst families. At RES, Mrs. Martin and the district failed to collaborate with the families on the equity training.

**Communication:** Culturally proficient leaders communicate often and effectively with all families, including families whose English is not their first language. These leaders invest in translation services, use existing tools such as Google translate, and always seek to understand which means of communication works better for who. For example, parents coming from cultures in which their primary language is an oral language, may prefer a voice message rather than having to read, particularly if they are not fluent in English. Communication also involves speaking a non-inflammatory language and mastering listening skills. In this case study, Mrs. Martin chose language that was offensive to some families, alienating them.

**Caring:** Cultural proficient leaders care for their stakeholders. Caring means that they respect families' values and resources. Caring relationships are built overtime and require intentional effort on the part of educational leaders who are busy all day. Caring supports positive and long-lasting partnerships between school and families. To create caring school communities, listening and compassion are key. Mrs. Martin cared for her community and had good intentions, but she did not have the cultural proficiency to understand that caring may be demonstrated differently depending on the stakeholder's culture.

**Culture:** Culturally proficient leaders understand that culture includes the individual, organizational, regional, national cultures. As such, these leaders always seek to learn about their constituents' cultures by engaging with them in respectful dialogue, inviting them to join committees, communicating, and caring. In addition, they may use other resources to learn more about a particular culture. By sending the letter, Mrs. Martin intended to learn more about the culture of her African American students. Because of the language she used in the letter, her good intentions did not produce the results she expected.

**Community:** Demographic information is an important foundational aspect of community. Culturally proficient leaders understand who they serve demographically and what their community's values. These leaders are engaged in the community so that they can better serve their students and families. Mrs. Martin was born and raised in the community. She admitted that the community had changed over the years and was not equipped to respond to the families' needs due to her lack of cultural proficiency.

**Connectedness:** This concept is important because intentional connections between educators and families foster trust among all parties. Connectedness also promote students' academic achievement, emotional well-being, and attendance. Culturally proficient leaders intentionally connect with families in order to create invite school cultures for students, parents, and community members. At RES, Mrs. Martin did not appear to be connected to some of her families.

**Collective Responsibility:** Collective responsibility assures that student, teachers, staff, leaders, families, community members, and board members all work collaboratively for the ultimate goal of student achievement and well-being. Collective effort is required from all constituents for maximum impact on student learning. In this case, Mrs. Martin omitted working with her teachers to prepare the survey before it was sent to families.

**Courageous Engagement:** For family engagement to be successful, culturally proficient leaders are willing to work with others to fulfill their responsibilities. The leaders model collaboration and in doing so they set high standards for themselves and others. The 7 Cs are meant to "encourage, educate, and empower educators" (Clark-Louque et al., 2019, p, 69). The 7 Cs are meant to help culturally proficient leaders assess their efforts toward family engagement.

The cultural proficiency for family and community engagement framework with its the 7 Cs (Clark-Louque et al., 2019) provides school leaders with a practical approach to working towards cultural proficiency in order to equitably engage families in their communities and thus creating socially just educational systems.

## **Conclusion**

Family engagement is crucial to improving student and community outcomes. Educational leaders play an essential role in fostering healthy family and community relationships. Today's schools are more diverse than ever before. As a result, it is of the utmost importance that educational leaders become culturally proficient so that they can educate their teachers and staff and involve all families in the school's life. This teaching case study demonstrated the importance of cultural proficiency as it relates to family engagement. In this scenario, Mrs. Martin alienated families because of her lack of cultural proficiency. The cultural proficiency framework for family and community engagement (Clark-Louque et al., 2019) provides school leaders with a practical model to guide their work towards cultural proficiency and family engagement while also satisfying NELP's standards 3 and 5.

Next, future and current leaders will have the opportunity to reflect on the teaching case study and apply what they have learned. Using the teaching notes, please answer the questions and complete the activity. These questions are provided to help leaders actualize family engagement using Clark-Louque et al. (2019) cultural proficiency for family and community engagement 7 Cs.

## **Questions**

1. As the principal of RES, what could you have done to prevent this incident and why would you have done it?



2. Reflect on the notion of good intention versus impact as it relates to this scenario.
3. With a partner, take turn being the principal and role play explaining to your teachers and colleagues how you plan to rebuild trust following the forum.
4. Using the 7 Cs, discuss and create a matrix of ideas on how Mrs. Martin could promote family engagement, given her context and the challenges she now faces.

## Activity

You are the principal of your school. You have been asked by your superintendent to write an action plan that aims to foster family engagement. Write one SMART goal for each of the 7 Cs (see the template below). These goals should be informed by best practices on cultural proficiency.

### FAMILY ENGAGEMENT ACTION PLAN

As a reminder, SMART goals are specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and time bound.

<b>Goals</b>	<b>Action Items</b>	<b>Person(s) Responsible</b>	<b>Resources Needed</b>	<b>By When?</b>
What can you do to be culturally proficient and foster family engagement?	What do you need to do to reach your goals?	Who is participating in the delivery of your goals?	What do you need to reach your goals?	When can your goals be reached?
Collaboration				
Communication				
Caring				
Community				
Connectedness				
Collective Responsibility				
Courageous Engagement				

## References

- Boske, C., Osanloo, A., & Newcomb, W. S. (2017). Exploring empathy to promote social justice leadership in schools. *Journal of School Leadership, 27*(3), 361-391.
- Clark-Louque, A. R., Lindsey, R. B., Quezada, R. L., & Jew, C. L. (2019). *Equity partnerships: A culturally proficient guide to family, school, and community engagement*. Corwin.
- Holme, J. J., & Finnigan, K. S. (2018). *Striving in Common: A Regional Equity Framework for Urban Schools*. Harvard Education Press.
- Khazzaka, J. (1997). The instructional leader as cultural mediator. *The Clearing House: A Journal of Educational Strategies, Issues and Ideas, 70*(3), 121-124.
- Kugler, E. G. (2017). Supporting Families in a Time of Fear. *Educational Leadership, 75*(1), 26-32.
- Lindsey, R. B., Nuri Robins, K., Terrell, R.D. (2018). *Cultural Proficiency: A Manual for School Leaders*, 4th Ed. Corwin.
- Marshall, C., & Olivia, M. (2006). *Leaders for social justice: Making revolutions in education*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- McCarthy, M. (2015). Reflections on the evolution of educational leadership preparation programs in the United States and challenges ahead. *Journal of Educational Administration, 53*(3), 416-438.
- NPBEA. (2018). National Educational Leadership Preparation (NELP) Program Standards - Building Level. Retrieved from: [www.npbea.org](http://www.npbea.org).
- Roy, L., & Roxas, K. (2011). Whose deficit is this anyhow? Exploring counter-stories of Somali Bantu refugees' experiences in "doing school". *Harvard Educational Review, 81*(3), 521-542.

Wells, A. S., Fox, L., & Cordova-Cobo, D. (2016, February 9). How Racially Diverse Schools and Classrooms Can Benefit All Students. Retrieved from <https://tcf.org/content/report/how-racially-diverse-schools-and-classrooms-can-benefit-all-students/?agreed=1>

Zeigler, K., & Camarota, S.A. (2018). Almost half speak a foreign language in America's largest cities. *Center for Immigration Studies* [PDF file]. Retrieved from [https://cis.org/sites/default/files/2018-09/zeigler-language-18\\_1.pdf](https://cis.org/sites/default/files/2018-09/zeigler-language-18_1.pdf)

Zong, J., & Batalova, J. (2017). *Frequently requested statistics on immigrants and immigration in the United States*. Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute.