

A JOURNEY TO CULTURAL PROFICIENCY

The path to cultural proficiency
is never-ending, regardless of
where you live or work.

BY KEVIN M. VAN ZEE

Yesterday I tagged along with a group of our elementary students on a walking field trip to the local cedar plank dance house. This was a nice change of pace from my weekly Second Step lessons, and the Oregon spring weather cooperated, bringing us bountiful sunshine and mild temperatures. Before we entered the dance house, the tribal elders asked us to turn in a complete circle, signifying our promise to leave the world and all of our “stuff” at the door as we entered this sacred space. It was a powerful experience for me to intentionally leave behind all of my worries and be fully present to learn about the ceremonies of the Confederated Tribe of Siletz Indians. As we sat around a cedar fire, I was reminded of the importance of being fully present while working with my students, and even more so, the importance of continuing to learn about the cultures of the students and families I serve.

I am currently the school counselor for Siletz Valley Schools (SVS), a K-8 and a 9-12 charter school located in the town of Siletz, Ore., a rural area just inland from the central Oregon coast. SVS has a majority Native American population of approximately 225 students and is the latest stop in my journey toward cultural proficiency. I’m not even sure if cultural proficiency is the right term – am I becoming more culturally aware, or culturally responsive (which I like) or culturally competent? What I do know to be true is that cultural proficiency is a life-long journey. I’m not sure I will ever truly become culturally proficient. I am not the guru of multicultural counseling nor do I have all of the answers about what it takes to be a culturally competent school counselor. What I do have is a unique blend of experiences in starkly contrasting settings that have helped me grow and develop both as a professional and as a person.

Before I get too deep into this, let me tell you a bit about myself to provide some context. I’m a white, male, heterosexual, Protestant, monolingual, college-educated, middle-class American from a traditionally dominant cultural background. If you looked up “white privilege” in the dictionary, you might see my picture next to the definition. I grew up in a loving home with great parents and supportive school and church communities; however, my world was

culturally, racially, economically and religiously homogenous.

Since moving away from a safe, supportive but sheltered upbringing in my hometown, I have been exposed to a wide variety of people and places. Because of this, I highly value and intentionally seek both living in and working with diverse, multicultural populations. Living in four different states (two in the Midwest, two on the West Coast) and working in both urban and rural settings has provided some experience and appreciation for various regional differences across the United States. One of my most important cross-cultural experiences was living in Northern India for three years, serving as the school counselor at an international boarding school in the foothills of the Himalayas, where I worked with students and staff from 25 different countries. Although I've now been back in the states for a decade and do sometimes slip back into a U.S./Euro-centric view of the world, I remind myself to try and maintain a larger, global worldview, one that recognizes and values different cultures, languages, races and religions. Two of my most recent school counseling experiences in Chicago and Siletz have given me the opportunity to maintain and strengthen this broader worldview.

After returning from India, my wife and I landed in Chicago, and I worked for the next six and a half years as a school counselor and school counselor manager for Chicago Public Schools. At Chicago Academy High School, I led a male mentoring group as a part of a larger citywide male initiative project. I regularly met with 10–12 high school boys, a mix of Latino and African-American students, with the goal of improving student achievement and graduation rates for our male students, especially students of color. We spent many Thursday afternoons together – playing basketball, eating pizza, doing homework and talking about life in and out of the classroom. It was an opportunity for me to build relationships with these young men, hear their stories and their struggles and share some of my own (I had recently become a father). Despite the many differences between us, we bonded because we took the time to be with each other, learn from each other and, as a result, better understand one another.



I also spearheaded the peer jury program with our student body as an effort to develop a restorative justice system in the school community. Instead of being suspended from school, students involved in disciplinary issues now had an opportunity to tell their story to their peers and then together determine a way to repair the harm and make things right. My role of training student jurors to engage in active listening and develop their skills as peer mentors was challenging in this cross-cultural setting, but it provided me with an opportunity to get to know my peer jurors on a deeper level. Moreover, listening to the cases that came before the peer jury also gave me a glimpse into the lives of my students and the obstacles to their success in school.

Three years ago we moved back to the West Coast. Needless to say, there was an adjustment period after the transition from the school world of Chicago to Siletz. I went from a bustling, urban population nearing three million to a sleepy, rural population of about 1,000.

From the Midwest to the West Coast, from a concrete jungle to the coastal range. From a river I would never eat fish out of to a river teeming with salmon and steelhead. From a predominantly African-American and Latino population to a majority Native American population. From a high school student body to a K–12 student body.

Yet, for all of the differences, there are two commonalities between these school settings. Both are high-needs,

underrepresented, disadvantaged populations. Both are schools where the non-dominant cultural group (or groups) is in the majority, and as a white person I am in the minority. These environments have sometimes been difficult, challenging and uncomfortable places to be. They are also, however, amazing, rich and wonderful places to be and are the places where I have stretched and grown in my own abilities to demonstrate cultural responsiveness.

At Siletz we are in the initial stages of implementing a restorative justice model of discipline similar to what we had in place at Chicago Academy High School (CAHS), and I've been privileged to have been a part of this process. What I love about the Siletz version is that it is truly incorporating a method of communication central to the Siletz tribe and the broader Native American culture. Talking or healing circles are used to solve problems, and our Warrior Transformation Circle at SVS is designed to help students work with their peers in solving problems both in and out of school. The group has named itself Nuu-Da'-Ye', which means "family." Similar to the peer jury at CAHS, our Warrior Transformation Circle provides an opportunity to engage students in their own personal and social development as they work with their peers in resolving issues and restoring relationships.

As the diversification in this country continues to grow, it is crucial that as school counselors we continue to develop the skills of cultural responsiveness to meet the needs of all of our students, which will increasingly mean students who are different from us no matter what our own cultural background may be. ASCA challenges us to prove how students are different as a result of what we do. I would go a step further as we work toward cultural competence and more inclusive practices to also ask what we need to do differently to meet students' needs.

Here are four suggestions for becoming more culturally competent. This is by no means an exhaustive list, but they have all proven helpful in my cross-cultural counseling work.

Practice culturally responsive caring:


Students don't care how much you know until they know how much you care. Throughout my time as a school counselor

and prior to that as a classroom teacher I have found this statement is a universal truth in the world of education, no matter with which cultural groups you're working. It's more than just caring about your students but actively caring for your students. As Geneva Gay writes in her book "Culturally Responsive Teaching," this encompasses "a combination of concern, compassion, commitment, responsibility and action." In other words, you care about students' emotional well-being and academic success and are doing something to have a positive impact on it. As a school counselor, the art of caring might come easily to you. But I would challenge you to take it a step further and make sure you are leading by example and ensuring the rest of your colleagues are also taking this caring approach toward all of their students.

Build relationships: Showing care and concern for students and their families is an important first step in this process. Don't be afraid to also share more about yourself and your own cultural identity to establish trust and develop a bond with your students.

Leave your comfort zone: This doesn't mean you have to move to the inner city or to Bhutan. But it might. Stay open to new experiences in your current role that will help you grow. Travel to other parts of the country or overseas if the opportunity presents itself.

Learn more about your students: Be intentional in learning about the cultures of the students you work with. Engage them in discussions, ask questions, visit with their families, listen to their stories, read relevant books and keep learning.

I believe the journey toward cultural proficiency involves both internal and external work and is never finished. My encouragement to all of us in the school counseling profession is to continue learning and growing and modeling that growth mindset for our colleagues and our students. Enjoy the journey. 

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