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Leading From Within

It would hardly be fish who discovered the existence of water.

—Clyde Kluckhohn (1949, p. 11)

One of the characteristics of proactive leaders in the schools we visited during the study was their courage. They were able to look within themselves and honestly confront their own biases and shortcomings, and they did the work they needed to do in the world. They seemed to share an assumption that internal work is necessary in order for external work in the school community to be authentic and effective. This courage to start with yourself and examine deeply held beliefs is also one of the essential qualities of leaders who foster resiliency in their schools (Krovetz, 1999). Robert Cohen,[1] one of the principals in the Leading for Diversity study, shared what was involved in his own process of self-reflection:

> When I went through my counseling program for my master's, we spent a lot of time in self-analysis, and it was eye-opening for me. We bought into the notion that in order to heal others we had to know ourselves and open ourselves. We needed to look at our values and beliefs, and at the difference between what we know and what we say and do. . . . I don't think you can just teach diversity; I think you have to live diversity.

RECOGNIZING ONE'S LOCATION

Key Question for Leaders

- How have my experiences and social and ethnic background influenced my perceptions, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors?

Before we can begin to unravel how our perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs affect our work in schools, we have to first become aware of how our social context has shaped our worldview. One of the many advantages of traveling in other countries, or even in different communities within our own country, is that it can make us reflect on our own culture and social environment in a new way. When we return to our familiar surroundings, they don't seem so familiar anymore. Spindler & Spindler (1982) called this "making the familiar strange" (p. 23). The contrast between other ways of living and our own way raises awareness that our way is not the only normal way, and that our beliefs and assumptions are not universally shared.

The jolting experience of culture shock can lead eventually in two directions. For some, it results in an increased appreciation of how their social environment—the water in the quote by Kluckhohn—shapes their most basic attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors. They realize, for example, that not everyone values time in the same way that U.S. corporate culture does, or that middle class white ways of socializing children place a premium on the individual (as opposed to the family collective) and encourage competition between individuals. For others, spending time in other communities or cultures seems to have the opposite effect—increasing their sense that their way is definitely "the best" and that "those people" are disorganized, lawless, dirty, and don't care about education. Unfortunately, this book is not a ticket to another community or country, but we hope that you will find opportunities to travel somewhat outside your usual milieu so that you can experience more directly the ideas we are discussing here.

THE CIRCLE OF LIFE EXPERIENCES AND PERCEPTIONS

We all have a particular location or vantage point from which we look at and experience the world. Our location includes our culture and language, our socioeconomic position relative to the dominant culture, our informal and formal education, and the physical characteristics (gender, race and ethnicity, age, physical capabilities, sexual orientation, etc.) through which all of our personal experiences have been filtered. Figure 1.1 illustrates our different locations in relation to events in the world.

In looking at the circle of perceptions, you might wonder why the arrows are of differing lengths. Shouldn't all perceptions be considered equal? In theory, yes, but the reality is that in the social worlds we inhabit, some locations are privileged. A 30-something white male carrying a briefcase and wearing a

Figure 1.1   The Circle of Life Experiences and Perceptions

Events in the world
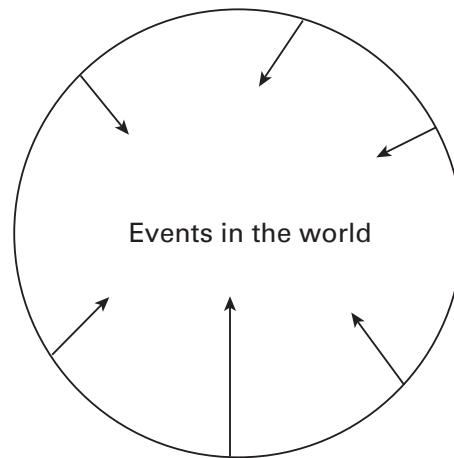
SOURCE: Developed by Norte (2001a).

suit, who is giving an account of a traffic accident, is more likely to be believed by the police than is an 18-year-old black male wearing baggy pants and a T-shirt. How we come to stand at a particular place on the circle, and how society differentially treats those in different locations, creates very divergent experiences among those who occupy different locations. Not only are our perceptions of events and their meanings different but also our society values some perceptions more than others, thus creating a second layer of difference. Our perceptions of the world are shaped in part by how the world has treated or responded to us. Knowing that one's perception is less likely to be valued can have numerous negative repercussions on individuals, from making them stronger in their pursuit of equal opportunity to making them reluctant to participate in the mainstream society or dominant culture or actively antagonistic toward it.

ACTIVITY 3: EXPERIENCING A DIFFERENT NEIGHBORHOOD OR COMMUNITY

Spend some time in a neighborhood that has a different ethnic and class makeup from your own. If you are working in a school with diverse students, choose a neighborhood that is home to some of the students. Do something you would ordinarily do in your own neighborhood, such as eat lunch in a restaurant, get a haircut, or go shopping for groceries. Pay attention to what people are doing and how they are doing it, including what languages or dialects they are using. Try to just observe, without judging. Also pay attention to how you are feeling. When you get home, try to answer these questions:

1.   Was there anything that made you uncomfortable? What was it?

2.   What does this discomfort tell you about your own socialization and worldview?

3.   Were there things you saw or heard that you didn't understand? If so, what questions do you have? How could you try to find answers to these questions?

MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES AND THE MYTH OF OBJECTIVITY

Key Question for Leaders

- How are my perceptions similar to or different from those of others at my school, for instance, people who play a different role in the school than I do and people whose ethnic and social backgrounds are different from mine?

You may have heard the parable about several blind Sufis who were all asked to describe what an elephant is. An elephant was brought before them, and each Sufi reached out and touched the elephant in order to describe it. One said, "An elephant is like a tree trunk." Another said "An elephant is like a big wall with a rough surface." A third said, "An elephant is like a snake." The fourth said, "An elephant is like a fan." And so on. Each Sufi was, of course, touching only one part of the elephant—the leg seemed like a tree trunk; the side of the torso like a wall; the trunk like a snake; and the ear like a fan. Each Sufi thought he was being objective but was actually bringing past experiences into his task of perception. Each Sufi, likewise, was unable to grasp the complexity of the whole elephant.

It is a recipe for conflict to act in the world based on the assumption that we have an objective view of it. In contrast, to assume that we each have a valid view of the world and have something to learn from each other's perspectives is the basis for mutual respect and appreciation.

Some will have an immediate reaction to this set of statements and will want to pose challenges such as, "Oh, so you believe anything goes, eh? How about female genital mutilation, are we supposed to accept that as a valid worldview? This sounds like cultural relativism gone amok!"

Actually, our point is more subtle. We are not suggesting that one needs to agree with any or all perspectives, but rather that it is useful and enlightening to try to understand why people have those perspectives. In other words, why and how did other people come to see the world in their particular way?

When we improve our ability to understand multiple perspectives, it gives us a more complete picture. As educators, it is especially important for us to

recognize that we, too, are subjective and that this is a part of being human. We don't need to feel guilty about being subjective and, in fact, coming to terms with our subjectivity frees us to move around the circle of perception—to understand and respect other perspectives, to embrace more of the picture rather than only one small corner. We are supposed to be educating young people to be tolerant and respectful of others, so we need to cultivate those skills in ourselves first. Robert Cohen, Principal of Sojourner Truth High School, said, "It's so helpful for me to just try to shift, to just try to see the other perspective. That ability to empathize, to step outside of yourself and say, 'Well, of course, so and so is angry and resistant. I would be, too, if I were in his (or her) position.'"

Physically traveling outside our comfort zone, as suggested in the previous section, can be one way to learn about other perspectives. Another way, which can easily be accomplished in your school or wherever you are, is to consistently ask open-ended questions (as opposed to yes or no questions), with the aim of understanding how a person came to see the world in their particular way. Of course, doing this in an inquisition-like way or putting people on the spot isn't going to help. The best learning of this kind takes place within respectful, trusting relationships that are the basis for honest dialogue, especially across differences. Educational leaders can, as part of their roles, establish structural opportunities for sustained, purposeful, and positive interaction with those who are different from themselves. We will give examples of such structures in Chapters 6 and 7.

THE LEGACY OF RACISM

Key Question for Leaders

- What has been the impact of racism in my life?

Unfortunately, even though the practice of slavery and discrimination based on race are no longer legal in the United States, racism still affects all of us in this country, whether we are African American, European American, Dominican American, or a recent immigrant from India or Taiwan. The influence of racism is still clearly visible to most people of color, who can usually name recent incidents in which they felt they were targeted in some way because of their race or ethnicity. Young blacks and Latinos frequently recount experiences when they walked into a store and were followed by security guards, while young white people rarely have the same experience. When the economy is in a downturn, people of Asian, African, and Latino backgrounds are often accused of draining the welfare coffers and burdening the educational system, even though there is agreement among economists that immigrants actually contribute far more in taxes to the American economy than they use in government services (Simon, 1999).

However, people of color are not the only ones to experience the damaging effects of racism. European Americans are also hurt but in a different way. McIntosh (1989) eloquently explains this:

As a white person, I realized I had been taught about racism as something which puts others at a disadvantage, but had been taught not to see its corollary aspect, white privilege, which puts me at an advantage. . . . I have come to see white privilege as a package of unearned assets which I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was meant to remain oblivious. (p. 10)

Some of these unearned assets are represented in such statements as

- I can be sure that my children will be given curricular materials that testify to the existence of their race.
- Whether I use checks, credit cards, or cash, I can count on my skin color not to work against the appearance of financial reliability.
- I can swear, or dress in secondhand clothes, or not answer letters, without having people attribute these choices to the bad morals, the poverty, or the illiteracy of my race.
- I can do well in challenging situations without being called a credit to my race.
- If a traffic cop pulls me over or if the IRS audits my tax return, I can be sure I haven't been singled out because of my race.
- I can choose blemish cover or bandages in "flesh" color and have them more or less match my skin. (pp. 10-11)

McIntosh points out that in recognizing these assets, she was also forced to give up the "myth of meritocracy. . . . If these things are true, this is not such a free country; one's life is not what one makes it; many doors open for certain people through no virtues of their own" (p. 11). She suggests that these unearned advantages for a small number of people "prop up those in power, and serve to keep power in the hands of the same groups who have most of it already" (p. 12).

When we realize that racism and its effects are part of the water we swim in—no matter what ethnicity we claim and what the color of our skin is—we are in a position to begin the next stage of our internal journey, unlearning racism.

UNLEARNING RACISM

Key Question for Leaders

- How can I develop the knowledge, consciousness, and vision that are essential to leading efforts to create more inclusive, just, and healthy communities in diverse schools?

A relatively new lens for understanding the roots of interethnic and racial conflict that offers a very pragmatic, yet ultimately hopeful approach, is that of unlearning racism. There is a generation of youth growing up today in the United States who, for the first time in history, are learning about the process of unlearning racism as part of their coming of age in diverse communities. The

idea of unlearning racism is a very powerful one because its basic assumptions are that

1. The practice of and participation in racism are learned

2. Racism exists, to some degree, in all people who have grown up in societies that have racist elements

3. Racism is something that we all have the capacity to unlearn

These are powerful assumptions that differ greatly from many ideologies and social theories that have held dominance in the past, as we noted in the introduction where we discussed the social construction of race.

While the concept of unlearning racism may not, as yet, have reached critical mass as a generally accepted assumption in society, its acceptance seems to be growing, particularly among today's youth. One example is the People's Institute for Survival and Beyond (see Organizations in Resource B). It supports trainers who travel throughout the country conducting workshops in unlearning racism and white privilege, at colleges, schools, churches, and community-based organizations. Great possibilities for understanding and change open up when the problem of racism is framed as a matter of learning, unlearning, and relearning, rather than as a chronic, immutable fact of life.

Our premise here is that if we, as school leaders, are to be effective in making transformative changes in our school communities, we must also be willing and able to engage in a process of transformative change within ourselves. As Lindsey, Robins, and Terrell (1999) point out, this process may not be easy or comfortable, yet it is ultimately necessary to go through the process of unlearning racism and arrive at what they term "cultural proficiency." Although they do not use the term *unlearning racism,* their analysis of the processes involved in achieving cultural proficiency is complementary and has many parallels.

We can begin the process of unlearning racism and contributing to a more socially just world by accepting, without judgment, that we all have biases and blind spots and that this is part of being human. And while we are not responsible for what shaped us as we were growing up, we are responsible for consciously taking steps to unlearn the damaging beliefs and attitudes that societal racism causes us to breathe in. We are also responsible for finding new ways to act based on this unlearning.

The proactive leaders who were part of our study exemplified the kind of self-reflection we have been discussing here. Leaders have to know experientially what helps and what hinders in this process of change. They have to speak from personal experience when they work with staff members on issues of diversity. People recognize when someone is working *with* them rather than telling them to do the work without ever having done it themselves. Proactive leaders are able to acknowledge and speak about their process of error and change and, in doing so, they provide a model for others. In short, they walk the talk based on their own experiences of struggle and transformation.

Rick Sebastian, principal of Ohlone High School, exemplified this awareness when he opened up a staff development day focusing on diversity issues with the following statement:
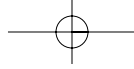
Our school is on the front edge of what California is going to become. All of us need to reflect. My own experience in working with the multicultural collaboration group has helped me to explore my own core values. . . . It's healthy to do this kind of thing.

NOTE

1. In order to protect the confidentiality of information shared, all individuals and schools in the Leading for Diversity study have been given pseudonyms.