

Stepping Stones (**steppingstones**) to Mental Health

steppingstones is one of 32 mental health capacity building initiatives in the province of Alberta. Funding is provided for it by Alberta Health and Wellness and the entire project is a partnership between Alberta Health Services - Mental Health Board and Alberta Education. While guidelines exist and submitted proposals had to meet basic criteria programs are unique and each project is able to develop creatively within its unique context. As part of our unique initiative we are being intention about creating a cultural competence initiative at one of our project schools.

Multicultural Support

Developing the Cultural Support Worker position has posed some interesting challenges both in terms of definition and assigning specific tasks. The Cultural Competence Continuum (Cross et al 1989) provides a useful framework for the development of goals and programs. The five stages proposed by the model; cultural destructiveness, cultural incapacity, cultural blindness, cultural pre-competence and cultural competence, allow for assessment and understanding of where a school community might be along the continuum.

Ngo (2008) states that “cultural competence demands a deep level of commitment and respect for cultural diversity” (p. 35). To illustrate the depth and breadth of commitment required he discusses five foundational principles: valuing cultural diversity, social justice, entitlement and rights, structural transformation and equality and equity. These principles are illustrated below in a discussion of the developing objectives of the **steppingstones** cultural competence framework.

Short-term Objectives

In the beginning the program development for cultural competence focuses on understanding the ethnic make-up of the school and how students perceive themselves in an ethnic context. This is an example of the principle of valuing cultural diversity (Ngo, 2008) and requires acknowledgement of diversity at all levels including within groups. Survey results show that while 34% of students in one **steppingstones** school identify themselves simply as Canadian without a hyphenated ethnicity attached, 66% claim a heritage from some other nation or region in the world. Of that 66% nearly half are from non-aboriginal visible minorities (TAG survey, 2008)

Additional activities include acknowledging practices promoting cultural competence that are already in place; providing an opening for conversations regarding staff and student understanding of multiculturalism and the introduction of vocabulary and theory related to cultural competence; inviting students to contemplate events, activities, and practices significant to their peers by making this information part of the school ethos and environment. Examples of such activities include having a cultural calendar; announcing days of significance during morning announcements and allowing students the opportunity to participate by providing brief descriptions of the meaning of that day for their culture or family; and participating in a multicultural fair where students, families, staff and community members are invited to participate in activities

designed to increase their knowledge of other cultures and to celebrate their own. These activities acknowledge surface culture (Heather John, personal communication February 27, 2009) by inviting individuals to showcase very obvious ways that ethnic groups may differ.

John (2009) makes a distinction between surface culture (basic identifying features), and deep culture (rules for living). While acceptance of surface differences is a step in the right direction it is not evidence of cultural competence; this requires a more complex understanding of both the life organizing influence of culture for the individual and the contribution that is made by all members to the community.

Mid-Term Objectives

The principles of social justice and entitlements and rights (Ngo, 2008) move the program into the next phase of development. Social justice concerns itself with the well-being of community members. In the quest for cultural competence the school must concern itself with the inclusion of all students, families, and staff as full participants in the life and decision making of that school.

Opening the door for students, parents and staff to describe their experience is a key developmental tool. Using an information gathering strategy called Conversation Café groups of students, staff, parents or combinations of the three may be asked to discuss their experiences related to school life including difficult topics like: discrimination, segregation, altered expectations and policy support for inclusion or other practices (Ngo, 2008). Such discussions serve to uncover bias or ethnocentric practices and beliefs, as well as identifying places where the school community is moving toward competency. Opportunities for frank discussion and sharing prepare students and staff to move to a different level of understanding.

The invitation for open dialogue has the potential to move the school away from any perceived 'charitable framework' (Ngo, 2008) and helps them to adopt the principle of entitlement and rights. Stakeholders participating in discussion can provide valuable insight into what is perceived as equitable by the current school constituents and the wider community.

Long-term Objectives

Schools, by their very nature, are evolving and growing. To meet their mandate of preparing students for the adult world they must be dynamic; always embracing changes that transform them. The fourth principle, structural transformation (Ngo, 2008), requires racial equality be an integrated part of the schools evolution. To do so requires consistent and constant feedback loops that inform decision makers of places or situations where inequalities or discrimination may be present.

In the long-term the goal is for the school community to operate at the fifth level of Cross' et al. (1989 cited in Ngo, 2008) continuum: Cultural Competence. For the school this would mean "integration of cultural diversity into all aspects of organizational structures and functions" (p. 31). Behaving in such a way requires recognition that some

students and families may require extra support or resources in order to experience equity. Schools are already familiar with this principle as it relates to educational outcomes and may use some of what they have learned in this regard to apply to social outcomes, as well.

This level of cultural competence requires a review of policies, programs and practices so they support the unique needs of both staff and students. The equal participation of racially diverse persons as members of the administrative team, the teaching staff as well as student government and parent advisory groups is also sought. At the level of the school as an organization a review of attendance policies or discipline practices may be necessary. Within curriculum various units may focus on the study of the contribution of cultural group's to the community the school is part of. An example of this type of activity may be to ask students to identify the origins of certain customs, foods, relational patterns, fashions, theory, or art and describe how they have made their way into the Canadian way of life and are now identified as 'Canadian culture'. This concept may also be understood as "infusion" (John, 2009) or mixing of deep cultural components from divergent groups into a new accepted way of being.

References

- John, H. (2009). Presentation to Rocky View Schools Social Emotional Team. February 2009. Unpublished.
- Ngo, H.V. (2008). *Cultural Competence: A Guide to Organizational Change*. Calgary, AB, Department of Canadian Heritage, Western Region.