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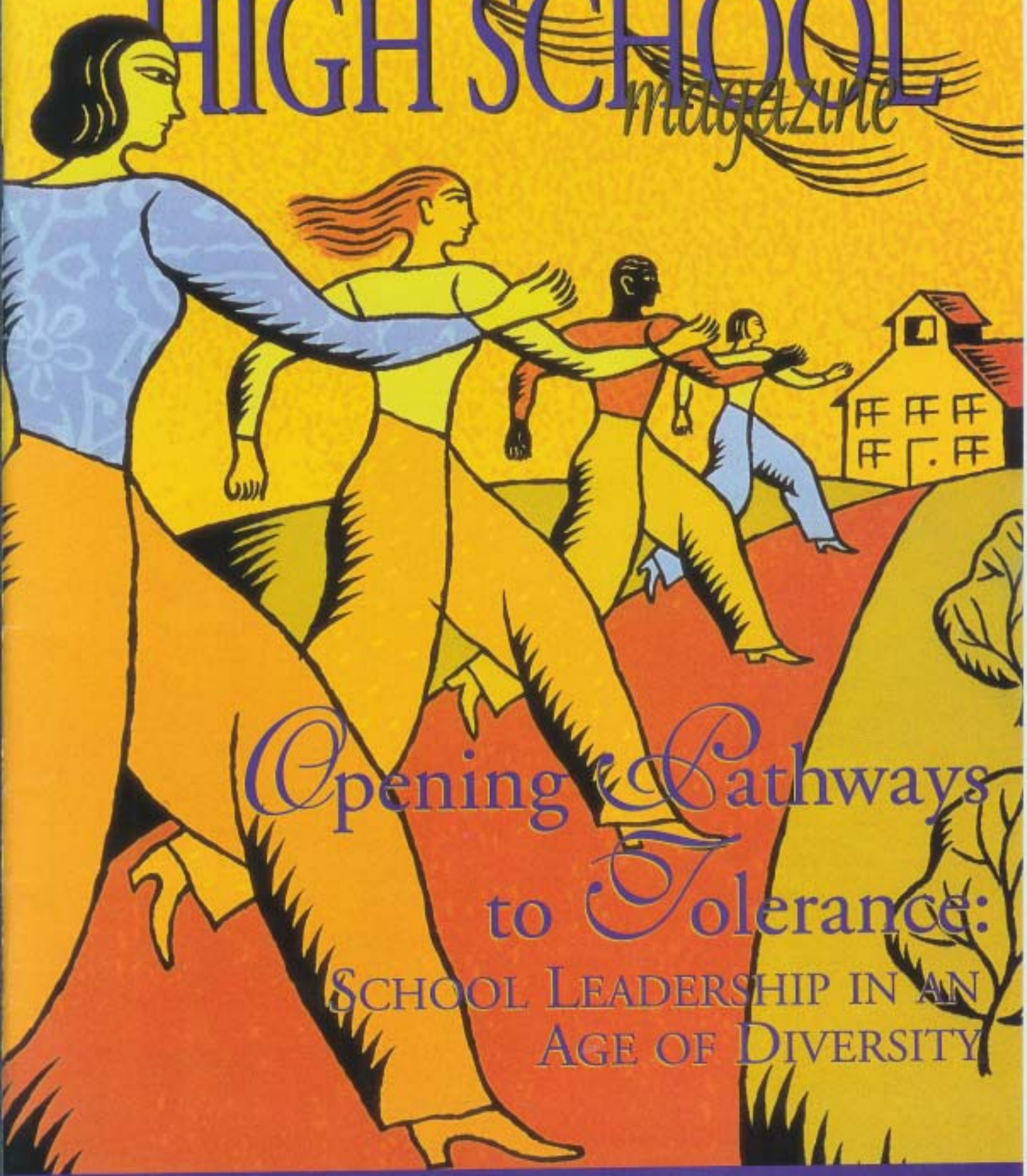

Opening Pathways to Tolerance: School Leadership in an Age of Diversity

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Understanding Differences in

By Jean Mavrelis

The Census Bureau predicts that by 2066 half of Americans will trace their roots to places other than Western Europe. As the demographics of school districts change, administrators are challenged to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse population. School administrators must integrate the strengths of various cultural styles into all parts of the system, including hiring practices, curriculum development, teaching and learning styles, discipline philosophy, and communication with parents.

Understanding other cultures, possessing multicultural flexibility, may well be today's most important core competency to acquire. The lucky part is we don't have to go very far to start the developmental process. We can begin with the diverse group of students we already have. All it takes is looking at differences differently: not as matter to be dismissed or discharged, but understood and managed effectively for gain, much as is (and will be) happening in the world of work. Students already have access to the World Wide Web. Many will take jobs with American businesses with offices in such cities as Hong Kong, New Delhi, Munich, and Mexico City, as well as New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles.

Understanding communication style differences of people from various cultural backgrounds will enable educators to better prepare our schools, our students, and ourselves for the 21st century. Much has been said about the impact of social oppression: much less has been said about differences in communication styles within the framework of a multicultural school.

Cultural Communication Styles

Learning to manage cultural differences has been compared to learning to drive a stick shift. We move from "unconscious ignorance" (we don't know what we don't know), to "conscious ignorance" (we begin to identify skills we need) to "conscious competence" (we still have to think about the order of our moves), and finally, to "unconscious competence" (I can drive and do other things at the same time).

Cultural Communication Styles

During the early years of our lives each of us learned a system of communication that grew out of a set of values, attitudes, and beliefs shared within the particular cultural context in which we were socialized. The cultural style for many Americans is a combination of the Anglo mainstream and a particular, "ethnic" identity as well (African-American, Haitian, Mexican, Puerto Rican, Chinese, Pakistani, Irish, Greek, etc.).

We learned the cultural system by observing people around us, particularly our early caregivers, which means most of us learned the system through our family, especially our mothers and grandmothers.

Observe mothers with their children. You will hear them passing on the communication rules: Don't say that! Don't talk back! Look at me when I'm talking to you! Stand still! That isn't polite! Speak up when you're spoken to! Be quiet! You're the oldest! Boys should… Girls should…, etc. We learn how loudly to speak, how fast, how carefully, how much, how freely, how directly, and to whom. We also learn to connect meaning to what people don't say, and we learn to read nonverbal cues.

Misunderstandings occur because we don't all learn the same system. It is not enough simply to speak the same language or to approach new people or situations with an open mind. No matter how open-minded we may be, we all have internalized assumptions about what "behavior" means and how communication should develop or unfold. Conflicts occur when those engaged in a dialogue have different assumptions and expectations. Worse yet, because these assumptions and expectations are so integrated, we are often not aware they even exist. This leads to ethnocentric judgments and misrepresentations of the motives behind the meaning of others' behavior.

U.S. Mainstream vs. Traditional Ethnic Cultural Differences

When I use the term mainstream, I am referring to all people, regardless of race, who were socialized within and use the communication style you are likely to see displayed on the six o'clock news by anchors of major networks. Many white ethnics (non-Anglo-Saxon Protestants, i.e. Irish, Jewish, Italian) do not fit the U.S. mainstream pattern. Many white ethnics and "people of color" do. There is no one-to-one correlation between race and cultural style. The determining factor is socialization. We are not born with a communication style, we are socialized by one.

For example, some Asian students may be very mainstream culturally, but it is important to understand Asian cultural meanings for those students who are more traditionally Asian. While two-thirds of Japanese Americans are not foreign born, two-thirds of all other Asian groups are foreign born. Filipinos are the largest growing Asian group in the United States. Many Asian students are assumed to be more skilled technically than verbally, placed in math and science, and discouraged from specializing in other areas. Even when they are fluent in English, their participation style may lead teachers to believe they are not skilled verbally.

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East Asian Participation Style

The style of African Americans and Anglos is to take the floor when they have something to say. But for East Asians the etiquette and discourse style is to wait for the floor to be given to them. For this reason East Asians often feel and are left out within an informal structure that relies upon spontaneous self-assertion. Even when the floor is given, East Asians prefer to have time to prepare in advance rather than offer a quick response as is often required in mainstream classrooms.

Asian-Anglo Case Study: Student Placement in an ESOL Class

A Korean-American student ran into difficulties when she was transferred to a new high school. Because she responded hesitantly during her initial interview for placement, it was assumed that her English was not fluent and she was placed in the ESOL class.

Arden Cutforth, a Filipino woman and assistant principal at the school happened to know the child. When she discovered that the student was in the ESOL class she wondered why, because she knew the student was fluent in English. The next time she saw the student in the hall she asked, "Why are you in the ESOL class?" "Oh," replied the student. "Last month when I transferred to this school they interviewed me. There were several people in the room, and I was very uncomfortable speaking up. They thought I didn't understand English."

Once placed in the class, it was difficult for the student to challenge the decision the authorities had made. Based upon the socialization she received within her cultural system, teachers and administrators know what is best for you and should not be challenged. To her, telling the authorities they had made a mistake was "challenging" their decision. Cutforth advised the student to go to the ESOL teacher and explain what had happened. Shortly after their discussion in the hall, the parents of the Korean student called Cutforth and asked her to intervene on their behalf. The Anglo ESOL teacher was frustrated: "Why didn't she come to me herself? And why did the parents come to you instead of directly to me?" Cutforth responded, "They wanted to approach someone who looks like them. I know what style to use. I gave them and their daughter an opportunity to talk quietly, and not in front of other people."

The above example is a classic case of a collision of cultural systems. Anglos want people to come to them personally if they have a problem, rather than get another person involved. Asians prefer to use mediators in order to avoid face-to-face opposition, which they consider too confrontational. The same behavior that is considerate in one communication system is rude in others.

Parent-Teacher Conferences

The Anglo teacher in this classroom also ran into other cultural breakdowns. Although the student was doing very well academically, a problem arose when it came time for parent conferences. This district had student-led conferences. When the Korean parents came up for conferences, the student froze in front of her parents. In her system, it was not her place to speak of her achievements, but the teacher's place. The Anglo teacher was disappointed in her for not doing a better job of communicating her achievements to her parents.

The assistant principal was again brought in. Increasingly, this administrator was called upon to mediate across cultures. More and more students of color began to find their way to her office, including African-American, Hispanic, South Asian, and Native-American. Her insights made her a valuable cultural mediator.

African-American vs. Mainstream American Patterns

If a mainstream administrator says the school plans to hire six African Americans, he or she may mean that literally: it is a plan, not a promise. U.S. mainstream culture is often preoccupied with creating a process that seems fair even if it doesn't produce the desired result. As applied to recruitment of teachers, Anglos might advertise an opening and feel they have done enough even if no African Americans respond. By creating an ostensibly fair process they have satisfied the demands of their culture to avoid favoritism and "mean well," even though the process they used did not accomplish what they wanted ("I can't control who walks through the door").

African Americans would say if the process you have in place doesn't produce the results you say you want to get (e.g., teacher recruitment that includes minority applicants), then you need to change the process to ensure you get the desired results. The means are supposed to serve the ends, not simply be ends unto themselves.

At one high school, teachers with the most tenure in each department were selected to teach the honors classes. Parents representing the African American Achievement Committee complained that the school did not have any African Americans teaching honors classes. The administration explained that African Americans were the newer hires and did not have the required seniority.

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African-American parents found the response hypocritical, especially since the administration had just established a committee to look into the problem of African-American students who were reluctant to achieve because of negative peer pressure. Black parents pointed out one way to address the problem facing the committee (Black students who might feel they were "selling out or acting White" by achieving), was to ensure role models were available when they rose to the top of their classes. This meant having African-American teachers teaching honors courses.

One way to create a win-win situation in terms of emphasis on process or outcome, is to work back from the desired outcome, and make sure the process is designed to achieve that goal. Otherwise, these different social and cultural underpinnings impact credibility and underlie misunderstandings about what Anglos and African Americans mean by being sincere. In order to communicate sincerity to African Americans, it is important to do whatever it takes to accomplish an agreed-upon goal, not simply make what Anglos might regard as a "reasonable" effort.

Etiquette For "Speaking": Creating A Friendly Environment

When I taught at Douglas Middle School in Chicago back in the '70s, one Black colleague said to me, "How come Whites don't speak?" At first I didn't know what she meant. Then I realized she was saying Whites do not automatically greet people in the hall. At first I was indignant: "What do you mean? I always say 'Hi' to you."

"Yeah," she said. "But you didn't used to." She meant before we were introduced. I realized I often don't say hello to people if I haven't first been introduced to them.

A good way to set the tone for the first day of school is to advise teachers to "speak" to people they pass in the hall, even if they haven't been formally introduced. Some white ethnics (Irish, Italian, et.al.) and people who grew up in the South or in rural areas are likely to already "speak." Getting mainstream people aboard is a good way to set the tone to make all families feel welcome when they come up to the school.

There are other "speaking" rules that are different for African Americans and mainstream Anglos. For example, in the mainstream Anglo system, if two teachers are engaged in a conversation, and another colleague approaches, they don't acknowledge the new person until they have finished. African Americans will acknowledge an approaching colleague with a nod or a quick "Hi, how you doin'," and then return to the conversation.

As outsiders to the conversation, African Americans often feel that Anglos are disrespecting them by not offering a quick acknowledgment. Anglos are more likely to feel they are being rude if they don't allow the person with whom they are speaking to reach an appropriate pause in the conversation before acknowledging anyone else. The difference can unwittingly create hard feelings. As we become aware of cultural communication style differences, we have access to alternative ways of responding to and interpreting behavior.

Talking About "Hot Topics"

Anglos grow up hearing expressions like "Never discuss religion or politics"; "If you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all"; "Don't rock the boat"; "Let sleeping dogs lie!"; "I never regretted anything I didn't say." Mainstream people are socialized to avoid hot topics, believing that relationships are at risk if you don't.

African-American sayings such as "Tell it like it is!" and "Walk that talk!" encourage dealing forthrightly and openly with problems, especially if they are "hot." Where Anglos see relationships at risk if they address hot topics, African Americans see relationships at risk or as not having a chance to develop if they don't.

"Signifying" And "Playing The Dozens"

Mainstream Anglos often mistake these African-American games of verbal taunting, teasing, and insult as

"starting a fight." I have heard White teachers ask, "Why are the Black students so mean to each other. It seems they're always trying to start a fight."

When I was teaching Middle School, all the students in my class were African-American. One day the shortest girl in the class was in the back of the room with the tallest boy. She said, "Miss Mav (relis), you better call this little boy cause I'm gonna' have to hurt him." I actually thought he was doing something to bother her and put myself in the middle of it by threatening to get involved.

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When Rose Hampton, an African-American teacher, found herself in a similar situation, she responded, "Go ahead, hurt him, Honey." Everyone knew it was play, and that a real threat had not been made. Everyone went back to work, and she didn't have to get involved.

Eventually I learned to differentiate play from something more serious. One of my students used to sit by the door and "crack" on other students as they walked in. It was the '70s, and one girl came in wearing "stacks" and "floods" (platform shoes and very short pants). Meta said, "Charlotte, if your shoes caught on fire, your pants wouldn't know nothin' about it." I didn't need to say, "Now Meta, be nice." Oftentimes this is the reaction of mainstream teachers who do not recognize the role teasing and taunting plays in African-American social relationships.

Eventually I became good at "signifying" myself. One day a cockroach climbed up the blackboard during a difficult math lesson. As students went for their shoes, I said, "Don't kill it, it's the only thing in the room that can multiply." My students applauded my effort to "signify" on them.

Hispanic/Native American/Anglo Cultural Patterns

Helen Rodriquez-Moore is a Mexican-American woman who was hired to

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teach Spanish to first graders. The school was predominantly white, with a sizable African-American population, and a smaller Hispanic student population. The principal was a mainstream white woman.

Rodriquez-Moore was doing many things above and beyond her job description. She created a curriculum for teaching Spanish and assessment instruments for language proficiency. The principal mentioned that there were funds available for that kind of work, but Rodriguez-Moore never got any.

Hispanics and Anglos have different expectations over who should make the next move. The principal assumes the teacher, if she wants or needs the allotted funds, will make an official request for them. The Hispanic teacher waits to hear from the principal as to what their next move should or will be.

The teacher continued to work in the district for two years. Parents and students loved her. However, she felt she was never able to share what she was doing because of isolation from her colleagues. Although Rodriquez-Moore tried to look for openings, no one seemed to want to take time to share what they were doing or to ask her how her program was going. Although some commented quickly, "I hear you are doing great things," they didn't seem to want to follow up with more information or friendship.

Mainstream people often compartmentalize work friends, tennis friends, personal friends, and family. Anglos do not usually make work friends personal friends, even those with whom they have worked closely for many years. The Hispanic pattern is to make work colleagues friends, and make friends like family.

Stress continued to mount for Rodriguez-Moore, but no one seemed to pick up the signs. While she and the principal said hello and goodbye, they did not sit and talk and laugh. She felt more like a work instrument than a human being. The Anglo rule is not to fraternize with the help, because it may lead to favoritism. The Hispanic rule is to offer friendship and loyalty to your boss in return for your boss looking out for you, for example, telling you how to apply for funding for the special projects you are doing.

Her reaction was not only Hispanic with regard to the value she placed on relationships. It was also very American-Indian in its emphasis on spiritual well being. Rodriguez-Moore said that in family photos it was the male descendants who were more Spanish, and the women who were Aztec. She had learned the views of her grandmother, who was a *curandera* (healer).

After much soul-searching, Rodriguez-Moore decided to quit. She felt her spiritual and emotional, and even physical health, was at stake. She loved the students, but she felt she was losing her soul. Rodriguez-Moore felt the principal was a good listener, but she was frustrated she did not understand. Hispanics value relationships. Anglos value hard work, self-reliance, and perseverance.

Quitting for these other reasons seemed to show a lack of character. When she told the principal of her decision, the principal was shocked and disappointed. The parents and students were counting on her. "They will think it's something they've done," the principal petitioned to her on the basis of saving the feelings of others, even if those feelings did not translate into relationships.

When asked to provide a letter of recommendation, the principal wrote, "Mrs. Rodriguez-Moore has worked for us for the past two years teaching Spanish in the first grade. I am disappointed to see her leave, as are parents, staff and children. If you have further questions, feel free to call."

The principal told her that she had a similar problem with the previous Latina woman who had worked

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there. She said, "She also talked about quitting to cook and be with family and do some soul-searching. I am hearing this again and beginning to understand it a little better." What she was beginning to understand was there was something cultural going on, but she was not sure what the specific differences were.

At the core of the breakdown is what's more important in life, relationships or work? For Hispanics, nothing is more important than people. For Native Americans, nothing is more important than finding one's own spiritual path and taking care of one's family and group. For Anglos who were socialized into the Anglo-Saxon Protestant work ethic, nothing is more important than hard work and accomplishments.

Gender and Culture

Female students are more likely to develop identity in connection and relationship to others, while male students are more likely to develop identity through separation and competitive achievement. As a result, male and female students tend to approach the world differently. Ask a little boy what's on his mind his first day in a new school when he sees a little boy approach him on the playground, and he may be wondering, "Can I take him?" Ask a girl the same question about another girl approaching, and she may be wondering, "Will she be my friend?"

Male and female students even respond to written material differently. In response to a question about a reading assignment, female students are more likely to read in order to understand what the author is trying to say, while male students are more likely to contrast their own view with the author's as they are reading. Males tend to see themselves in competition with others rather than in cooperation.

Female discourse is likely to be more narrative and inductive, while male discourse is often more deductive, beginning with a statement that identifies the point they are making. Since girls work their way through the narrative to make their point, teachers may think they have missed it all together and stop them prematurely.

Conclusion

Although I have identified only a few of the patterns of difference here, I believe I have described enough of what is going on for members of each group to help school administrators and teachers understand the cultural complexity of what is there. I would also hope that this understanding will translate into better decisions and outcomes and, overall, into a more effective management of social and cultural diversity in the schools.

Jean Mavrelis is president of Jean Mavrelis Associates, Inc., a consulting firm that specializes in cross-cultural issues for educators as well as issues pertaining to gender and culture.

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