

# Striving for Cultural Proficiency

By Diane Foster and Lynne May Lim

As teachers at Cambridge Friends School (CFS), we are privileged and challenged to be a part of an educational institution built around the importance of fostering and valuing a diverse school community. The school's culture is built on a breadth of life experiences, varied perspectives on subject matter, and a range of methods for helping all students achieve success. This culture enables the school to enact its mission and commitment to Quaker education.

The two of us have been colleagues at CFS for many years. In some ways, our journeys have been similar. Our commitment to our school's mission is what holds us here; it is our reward and our challenge. Our journeys have also been different because of our own identities, one of us as a teacher of color and the other as a white teacher. Together, as individuals and colleagues, we are constantly striving to be culturally proficient<sup>1</sup> in our work. In this article, we highlight some of our experiences that relate to teaching and learning in our classroom communities, as well as our professional community.

## Building Cultural Proficiency Within the Classroom Community – Lynn May's Story

In my early childhood classroom, I am able to say out loud and proudly to my students that I am Filipino-Chinese, born and raised in the Philippines. Sometimes I speak, count, and sing to them in my home languages. They spontaneously join in. When I openly share my culture with them, I am transported back to my birthplace, which I miss very much.

<sup>1</sup> See article this issue, pages 2-3.

My students, in turn, open up and begin telling about their own racial and cultural heritage. "I was born in Korea and my parents came and we rode on an airplane." "My birth mother is Latina so I am Latina too." "My ancestors are from England and Germany, and my grandma is in Connecticut. I was born in Boston." "I am actually Korean, American, and Italian." "My father and I are Jewish, and my mother is from India." The students and I experience each other in the context of our race and culture.

I am able to say out loud and proudly to my students that I am a mother, a sister, and a daughter. They know me through the stories I tell. I tell them stories from my childhood, such as the time I felt jealous of my sister when she got a new dress



and I did not. I tell stories about my own children's experiences, including when my daughter ate a whole canister of fish flakes and tried to keep it a secret. The students and I experience each other in the context of our stories.

My students see themselves and their families reflected in the stories I tell because these tales sound and feel familiar. They put themselves in those stories and relive their own experiences or imagine how they would respond to the situation.

They ask me to tell the stories again because each time they interact with these stories, they continue to develop their self-concept and expand their perspective and empathy. Whenever I share stories of my children and my family in class, I feel my family's presence. My students feel their families' presence too. Often, they respond to my stories by sharing their own. The classroom becomes enveloped in the warmth and safety that families provide. The children and I experience each other in the context of our membership in a family unit.

Conversations cover a range of topics that matter to children. They express their observations and questions and feel validated as thinking and curious learners. A white child with straight, brown hair was getting a haircut after school. He looked at the hair of a black classmate and concluded, "His hair will never grow to touch the back of his neck." The black child pulled a strand of hair to show its actual length. "I am getting a haircut soon because it is getting long. See?" The white child initially looked surprised to see hair extend the way his classmate's hair did. Then he was amazed. The two children talked some more and then went off to play together.

Children feel safe to ask perplexing questions pertaining to their identities. After having been to the courthouse that morning to become a U. S. citizen, a student, born in South America and adopted by white parents, lingered at the classroom doorway while holding an American flag. He asked, "Am I still Latino?" A student, who was adopted from China when she was an infant, turned to me one day and said, "Mama?" I looked at her. "Are you wondering if your birth mother looks like me?" She nodded. I told her that I am Chinese like her birth mother, and that we probably share similar features, like the color of our eyes, hair, and skin. "And you probably look more like her than I do." She nodded. We hugged.

Children ask questions in different ways. One day, I found one of my white students in our class bathroom, standing

on a bench and bent over the faucet. I asked her why her hair was wet. “Because when my hair is wet, it is straight. I want my hair to be straight like Maya’s.” Maya was an Asian student in my class. Later that day, I learned from my white student’s mother that she had done the same thing at home. She also wanted to have skin color like her biracial black and Latina classmate. These stories say to me that children who are encouraged to ask questions and to explore freely, under the watchful eyes of trusted adults, feel validated as seekers of knowledge and truth.

### Building Cultural Proficiency Within the Professional Community – Diane’s Story

During my first year at CFS, professional support for new teachers included periodic meetings with Dr. Linda Mizell, a former CFS director of admissions and an academic expert on African American history. Early in the year, Linda proposed challenges that led me to begin a process of expanding my perspective. One was to read Pat Parker’s poem, “For The White Person Who Wants to Know How to Be my Friend.” The first two lines of the poem read:

“The first thing you do is to forget that I’m Black.  
Second, you must never forget that I’m Black.”

I stood and read, then re-read those lines many times, thinking about their meaning. Honestly, they confounded me in a way I am somewhat embarrassed to write now. One thing I have always appreciated about that early challenge is that I was pushed to figure the meaning of the poem’s first two lines and Linda had the confidence in me to do so.

That style of professional development has shaped much of my understanding of teaching and learning, not just through the content that I have learned, but through a professional culture where colleagues and other experts are going to push me to have a greater understanding of the role of race, ethnicity, and other aspects of identity in the classroom. I will

be pushed, I will be trusted to learn, and I will in turn push others. It has always been a continual cycle. This is the model I have most valued at CFS.

Many years ago, I was leading a discussion in my kindergarten classroom about telling secrets and the feelings of envy and hurt that accompany being excluded. Rather than make a blanket rule prohibiting secret telling, I wanted to lead them to the decision themselves. During the discussion I asked if anyone had ever felt left out. Most had and told stories about not being allowed to play soccer at the park because of age, about not being invited to a birthday party because all the other guests were boys, and other stories like this. Others nodded in agreement and expressed empathy. After several examples, a girl told about how two girls in her preschool had never let her play with them, how she would ask to play with them nearly every day but they would always say no. Another girl in the class empathized with her, and together they concluded that this had happened to both of them because they were black.

At the time, I was part of a group of teachers working closely with Ms. Enid Lee<sup>1</sup>, an Anti-Racist Education Consultant and teacher educator who worked with CFS teachers for many years. She developed and taught us a tool to use in thinking about our internal reactions to situations, our intentions, and our impact. When these girls said they were left out because they were black, my original thought was, “Maybe it wasn’t because you’re black.” My next thought was, “Oh, how white of me.” Because I had practiced using the tool Enid had taught me, I recognized my reaction as being about me, not them, and I kept it in my own head to sort out later. I was able to respond to these students as I had done with the others. Some white students did ask aloud the same initial question I had thought. In that moment, I saw how much harm I would have caused if I had been the one to voice those initial thoughts.

<sup>1</sup> Enid Lee, Director of Enidlee Consultants, Inc. [www.enidlee.com](http://www.enidlee.com)

Later, after more self-reflection and talking to Enid about the situation, I realized that in no other example had anyone, including me, questioned the reality of the scenario. For instance, we had not said to the boy who was left out of a soccer game, “Maybe it wasn’t because you were too young. Maybe you were a ball hog.” Yet, immediately some students and I had questioned the black girl’s experience. “Maybe it wasn’t because you are black. Maybe they just didn’t like you.” It was so easy to put this child in a position of having to prove her experience to be true, when we would not otherwise do that. In examining this scenario with Enid, I was encouraged to push my own thinking and then use that experience to educate others. Some colleagues and I made this scenario a pivotal part of a workshop we developed. We presented that workshop several times, both within the school and to other area educators. The cycle of being pushed to learn, experiencing that learning, then teaching others continued.

### Challenges and Rewards

Striving for cultural proficiency is a continuous process, a journey that demands a great deal from members of the community. It requires an investment of time and resources - both material and human - and it requires a firm commitment, patience, and resilience. It challenges the community to cultivate and foster trust as we face obstacles and work to eliminate them. It challenges people to find the courage to step out of their comfort zones and hold themselves accountable. We definitely feel that we have the same conversations, debates, and arguments year after year; many times with the same people. Our experiences have taught us that cultural proficiency is not something that is achieved. It is not an accomplishment, but a constantly fluent, evolving process or path. We talk about “striving” frequently and, at times, different interpretations emerge regarding which direction our path should take. It is difficult for adults to be uncomfortable and this process is not easy or comfortable.

Yet, working towards this end is highly rewarding. As in our experiences at Cambridge Friends School, the school-wide commitment to strive for cultural proficiency serves to affirm and nurture individual and collective identities so that all of its members can say:

"I am visible."

"I am a seeker of knowledge and truth."

"I am an agent for change."

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**Cambridge Friends School (CFS)** is a Quaker coeducational school serving 215 students in pre-kindergarten through grade eight. Established by the Friends Meeting at Cambridge, it has a diverse student body with a range of family structures. Guided by Quaker principles, CFS engages students in meaningful academic learning within a caring community strongly committed to social justice. The rigorous learning environment teaches children how to think critically with competency and confidence. Teachers help children develop a commitment to truthfulness and personal integrity, with the skills to solve problems and do so as members of a global community. To learn more about Cambridge Friends School visit [www.cambridgefriendsschool.org](http://www.cambridgefriendsschool.org).