

Take Stock in Children

“Cultural Sensitivity: A Few Thoughts on How to Work Successfully With Other Cultures”

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“Moving at the speed of life, we are bound to collide with each other.” –*Crash*

The quote stated above is from the movie *Crash*, a film that deals with the racial, socioeconomic, and cultural differences that we encounter every day. The statement really speaks to the fact that even though we live in a society which we call the “melting pot,” people are very diverse in every aspect of their lives, and we will never get to a society that has become “melted.” People are different. In light of this realization, how can we as mentors, student advocates, counselors, teachers, and coaches, work successfully with an extremely diverse population?

Having a sense of cultural awareness and sensitivity can really determine how effective we are in working with students of a different cultural background. The following are some things to be mindful of when working with other cultures: cultural values and attitudes; family structures and dynamics; religious practices; child rearing practices; sociopolitical factors; the person’s level of acculturation; poverty and economic concerns; history of oppression; language barriers; and whether or not the person has been subject to racism and prejudice.

Being a culturally competent worker entails having an awareness of the other person’s unique culture and striving to understand the person from his or her cultural standpoint. To illustrate my point, let’s take for example a student who is from a family who immigrated to the United States. Although the student has been living in the U.S. for quite a while, he and his family have not fully assimilated to the mainstream American culture. He often shows up late to his meetings with you and fails to maintain eye contact when he is having a conversation with you. For those of us who have been born and raised in the United States or who have fully acculturated to the mainstream culture, we understand this as being rude and disrespectful. On the other hand, the student views this as perfectly normal because this is acceptable in his culture. In a situation like this, being aware of those behaviors and having a genuine interest to begin to understand these acts in light of the person’s culture will help facilitate a good relationship.

Awareness and understanding will then lead to mutual appreciation, acceptance, and respect. Changes will begin to take place, and the helping process will go smoother once the student feels accepted and understood. Becoming a culturally competent helper is a process which we must work on in order to better help our students. Let’s strive to not just collide with our students but to make a meaningful difference in their lives.