

# A District-wide Approach to Culturally and Linguistically Sustaining Practices in the Boston Public Schools

COLIN ROSE AND MWALIMU DONKOR ISSA

*The district's system-wide professional development on culturally sustaining practices creates consistent expectations for educators to address their biases, build relationships with students and parents, and improve instruction – and gives them the tools to do so.*

What CLSP [culturally and linguistically sustaining practices] has done is put into words what conscientious career educators already know: students don't care what you know unless they know that you care. That has a tangible impact on student outcomes: "Do you know enough about me to teach me?" We have begun work on cultural awareness, where we are asking ourselves, "What do you know about yourself and your perceptions, and what do you know about your students?" . . . And when we begin to reflect, we can have a much broader view of the inputs necessary to support student growth, especially when it comes to those groups of students who are often unsuccessful at our school.

– Eugene Roundtree, Headmaster,  
Snowden International High School

Longstanding mainstream narratives and systems – built on assumptions about what knowledge is relevant, what values and behaviors are necessary or normal, and who can achieve in school – affect beliefs, practices, and decision making at all levels of education and social systems. A sordid history of domination, mistreatment, and neglect is mixed into the foundations of our societal systems, and the educational system has not been immune. Marginalized students are seen as incapable learners who need to be fixed or converted in order to do well in school.

These ingrained beliefs are reinforced by district policies, programs, and structures that may be well-intentioned, but often add more impediments for students historically marginalized and perpetuate or

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exacerbate unequal outcomes.<sup>1</sup> Nothing illustrates such misguided decisions and lack of intentionality as well as the 2014 and 2015 reports on the inequitable opportunities<sup>2</sup> and promising practices/unfinished business<sup>3</sup> for Black and Latino Males in the Boston Public Schools (Miranda et al. 2014; Tung et al. 2015).

It is in this context that the Office of Opportunity and Achievement Gaps (OAG), of which I [Colin Rose] am assistant superintendent, has embarked on a journey to put cultural proficiency front and center in the Boston Public Schools (BPS). Adopting the theory of *targeted universalism* has given us an alternative frame for school improvement to take broad action based on the needs of the most marginalized groups to ensure that all levels of impediments for these students are addressed, thus addressing barriers for all.<sup>4</sup> From this foundation, we have set out to intentionally and unapologetically bring change to the interface between schools and historically marginalized populations in an attempt to reverse years of structural and cultural oppression. In the summer of 2016, I was able to work with Superintendent Tommy Chang and other district leaders to express this fact as our district’s “problem of practice,”<sup>5</sup> which culturally and linguistically sustaining practices (CLSP) are intended to address.

## THE CYCLE OF LEARNING FOR ALL OF BPS

For over a decade, cultural proficiency has been identified as a major lever of change for Black and Brown students in BPS, both in the original 2006 Achievement Gap Policy and again in the recently adopted 2016 version (BPS 2016). However, there has not been a sustained definition and core set of competencies that would bring coherence to what this means for BPS.

This ambiguity allowed cultural proficiency to be relegated to something ancillary, when it should be in the forefront in every element of our work.

To combat this sidelining, and influenced by multiple sources<sup>6</sup> on culturally responsive and anti-racist education, I defined a set of competencies that all individuals within our systems should possess, or CLSP, which call for three specific competencies:<sup>7</sup>

- awareness/consciousness of the structural and cultural biases that inform our systems and personal cultural views;
- authentic learning of/relationship building with communities, parents, and students;
- the adaptation of practice to build on assets and match needs based on the foundation of the prior two competencies.

We will only truly operationalize targeted universalism in our district when all individuals – from food services to academics, school

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- 1 For research supporting these concepts, see <http://vue.annenberginstitute.org/issues/48>.
- 2 <http://cce.org/files/Opportunity-and-Equity-Full-Report-FINAL.pdf>
- 3 [http://cce.org/files/PromisingPractices\\_UnfinishedBusiness\\_FullStudy\\_FINAL.pdf](http://cce.org/files/PromisingPractices_UnfinishedBusiness_FullStudy_FINAL.pdf)
- 4 The term targeted universalism was coined by Harvard University political scientist and sociologist Theda Skocpol and popularized by John Powell. For more, see the article by Christopher Chatmon and Vajra Watson in this issue of *VUE*.
- 5 For complete details on the problem of practice, see [https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1MuyTg3Xx9S4x\\_JAEHUrjLtyZnZ7-pQCZfnu9lahhe\\_c/edit#slide=id.g25592045d2\\_0\\_0](https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1MuyTg3Xx9S4x_JAEHUrjLtyZnZ7-pQCZfnu9lahhe_c/edit#slide=id.g25592045d2_0_0).
- 6 See <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1MZYGKuPjrg4RksoJ0WXvnSeHueqpBsSerNWJMskktRQ/edit>
- 7 For a complete list and description of these competencies, see <https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B5Q4XDpkAw74dZln50pWMMWpLVUU/view>.

committee members to lunch monitors – are proficient in these competencies.

The implementation plan for the 2016 OAG policy outlines CLSP as a process of continual learning for all staff in the system, both within professional development and in induction activities. It also calls for the support of curriculum, programs, and materials that allow for CLSP to be made operational where it truly matters – in schools and classrooms. Wrapped around this professional development and support follows a change to accountability systems for all stakeholders to be more attuned to CLSP. New “look-fors” in teacher, principal, and other staff evaluations; changes to our school quality measures; and new measures of partner quality are just a few of the ways in which CLSP has or will be incorporated. CLSP is also a foundational part of the district’s overall instructional vision, Essentials for Instructional Equity.<sup>8</sup>

Helping to lead this charge in capacity building across the district is the director of cultural proficiency, Hayden Frederick-Clark, who has created and coordinated content and support for central office, partners, schools leaders, parents, and the community around CLSP. This curriculum included a series of professional learning for all school leaders during the 2016-2017 school year focused on the constructs of race and bias, preparing them to begin to lead the work at their schools in the 2017-2018 school year. Frederick-Clark and I also helped to support the crafting of school-specific CLSP Goals, which are connected to the instructional focus and Quality School Plan for each and every school in the district.

One challenge we have encountered in the work is the capacity to support schools that range across a continuum, from those that are just starting the

work to those that have been intentional about race, bias, culture, and equity for years. School leaders will continue to need different levels of support and expertise.

To mitigate some of these challenges in readiness, we have held consultancies with individual school leaders and their teams in the spring and summer to create their plans of continual CLSP learning that complement key focus areas in their schools. During the school year, we are meeting regularly with instructional superintendents (coaches/supervisors of principals) to get notes from the field and bolster their ability to support schools. We have also provided mini-grants for schools and are currently commissioning a study to examine where and in what populations race and culture might be a barrier to teachers building authentic relationships with students (key knowledge for competency #2 in the CLSP Continuum). With that information, we will be able to better direct our services as a district to where there is teacher need.

### **CLSP AT THE SCHOOL LEVEL: SNOWDEN INTERNATIONAL HIGH SCHOOL**

Eugene Roundtree has spent over a decade as an educator in BPS and is in his third year as a principal at Snowden International School at Copley. Roundtree notes that the district’s push around CLSP has given leverage to many core underpinnings of great instruction.

The district-wide focus on CLSP competencies and the accompanying structures have put a compulsory nature to cultural proficiency . . . not just solely relying on you as a school leader to cultivate a coalition of the willing or trying to finesse outdated  
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<sup>8</sup> See <https://www.bostonpublicschools.org/Page/6648>.

structures to create urgency. . . . The mandatory CLSP SMART goal for the building has put the work front and center.

As part of the school’s professional development, Roundtree’s staff participate in Race Dialogues, a program run by YW Boston<sup>9</sup> that leads participants through conversations about race and ends in a racial equity action plan created by the group.

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– Eugene Roundtree, principal,  
Snowden International School at Copley

This is a beginning to normalizing conversations around race and equity as a staff and get to some underlying assumptions and attitudes that may trickle down and become barriers in the classroom. The way the [OAG] is framing the work as a “continuous cycle” is an indicator that this practice will not be going away in the near future.

Roundtree and his staff have already started making concrete changes to structures and programming at Snowden.

Staff will continue examining their curriculum using the 7 Forms of Bias

protocol<sup>10</sup> and we will have a building-wide book study during our CPT (common planning time) on *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain* (Hammond 2015) – in hopes that teachers see the interdependence among pedagogy, curriculum, and the relationships with and backgrounds of the students.

Even with this leverage and momentum, Roundtree speaks to the challenges of differing levels of buy-in and pushback.

We are trying to get out of a culture of normalizing failure and getting all staff to be less inclined to point the finger primarily at the students and be more reflective of their own practices. The lack of student progress is, in fact, partly due to the nature of the relationships between students and staff and some of the structures in the building. . . . There is a lot of pushback around the mindset work, and there is even more when we try to change actual conditions and policies.

Roundtree spoke about some school-wide policies that have been hot button issue that underscore these tensions, including teachers’ grades (overly weighting elements such as homework), the “no D” policy (if students do not get a C they fail), and a “no hats” policy, which create unnecessary conflict between staff and students while overly valuing compliance to teacher-created cultural norms.

To support his leadership direction and justify taking targeted action, Roundtree is leaning on data.

We are beginning to be intentional about giving more supports to our Black and Latino young men. . . . When you disaggregate our data,

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<sup>9</sup> See [www.ywboston.org/](http://www.ywboston.org/).

<sup>10</sup> For more information, see <https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B5Q4XDpkAw74MERNRV9GempDek0/view>.

they are the subgroups least likely to be successful at our school in multiple measures. . . . One way we are doing this is through deepening our commitment to programs such as 10 Boys.

### THE 10 BOYS INITIATIVE

Ultimately, we hope CLSP will not only help educators to critically reflect on their biases and relationships in the context of their instruction, but also enable schools to support the development of socio-political consciousness of their students, who then can be the agents of change and problem solvers of the future. One of the vanguards of this work is the co-author of this article, Mwalimu Donkor Issa, director of targeted programming in OAG and manager of the 10 Boys Initiative,<sup>11</sup> which focuses on the empowerment of Black and Brown young men. More than 2,000 young men in grades 4 through 12 have been involved in 10 Boys in the past five years, and in 2017, the program served young men in over thirty schools in BPS.

The 10 Boys Initiative was created two decades ago by a former Boston principal, Ingrid Carney, who wanted to be of service to young men of color who were at risk of becoming truant at her school.

**MWALIMU DONKOR ISSA:** The program encourages belief in one’s own ability that is activated through a balance of collectivism and self-determination. Each cohort works through five core types of experiences: academic rigor, physical challenges, tutoring, community service, and “real talk.”<sup>12</sup>

By creating cohorts of young men who cooperate and collaborate in school and beyond, schools like Snowden are working to create intelligent, goal-oriented leaders – our young Kings.<sup>13</sup> The cohort approach also helps students feel attached to school as a supportive community that recognizes their individuality and cares about and promotes their success.

### SUSTAINING THE COMMITMENT

Boston’s commitment to weaving cultural proficiency into the fabric of policy and practice throughout the district and its schools, while relatively new, has gained considerable momentum. In this short piece, we have touched on changes at the district level, with the CLSP framework and supports; the school level, with the example of Snowden, a school that has embraced CLSP; and the student level, with the example of the 10 Boys Initiative. But in a large system, with varying degrees of understanding and buy-in, we see and expect pushback. We must have the courage to work through resistance, build capacity, and hold ourselves accountable for these changes.

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- 11 See <https://www.bostonpublicschools.org/cms/lib07/MA01906464/Centricity/Domain/2218/About%2010%20Boys%20Initiative.pdf>.
- 12 “Real Talk” refers to session between the young men and the facilitator where the young men get to drive the conversation based on what they are grappling with in their real-time, lived experience inside or outside of the school context.
- 13 For more about the use of the term “Kings” for young African American men, see the article by Chatmon and Gray in *VUE* no. 42 at <http://vue.annenberginstitute.org/issues/42>.

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