
Cultural Leadership in a Rural School: A Team Effort

By Leah Paronavitana

All teachers are leaders, and leaders change structural norms.

In our case, leadership involved bringing a schoolwide cultural education project to Clarenville Middle School. My name is Leah Paronavitana and I am a teacher of visible minority. As a child growing up in the NL school system in St. John's, Newfoundland, I was exposed to peers of various cultures and backgrounds through school involvement with community organizations such as Sharing Our Cultures.

When I received my first teaching assignment in August 2023 in the small town of Clarenville, Newfoundland, I was delighted. At long last, I had a class of my own. As the school year progressed, however, I noticed occasional instances of negative commentary from a small number of students about people of different races. As somebody of visible minority, this hit home, and I knew something had to change. After all, Clarenville did not have the level of racial diversity that was evident in urban St. John's, so how could I possibly expect students to be as knowledgeable as they might be in St. John's? I couldn't. My thoughts on this tumultuous issue kept brewing until one day in March 2024 when a colleague recounted a story to me of a student expressing his surprise upon finding out that there were more than two races beyond "White and Black". At that moment, a thought sparked in my mind. I ran down to the principal's office and discussed the issues that had been going on regarding a lack of cultural education and suggested the making of a cultural showcase. This showcase, I decided, was going to be a schoolwide event whereby each class could pick a country to research and develop a poster board on it. Once completed, every class could present their poster board to other classes.

The administration at my school were incredibly supportive of this plan and offered insights and ideas to develop it further. I then shared my initial planning with my colleague and friend, Ms. Nikita Marsh, who was instrumental in building the foundation of this event and in gathering the support and attention of other staff. Over the next two months, Ms. Marsh and I worked tirelessly. We compiled a list of countries and had each of the thirteen homeroom classes in our school select one. We enlisted the support of the Association of New Canadians and Sharing Our Cultures; two nonprofit organizations who took the time to meet with us and kindly offer us resources to support our event. We planned a food menu representing as many countries of the world as we could, and cooked and froze our selections. Our students took on a great share of responsibility as they researched their countries of choice and created all of the decorations for the event. On one occasion, Ms. Marsh's class joined mine in a double cooking session to prepare food for the showcase. Our guidance counsellor and physical education teacher were integral in creating games and additional activities for students to participate in. It was amazing to see so many teachers coming together to create a deep learning event for our students. By May 22nd, 2024, the day of the showcase, we were exhausted but finally ready.

A global playlist blared through the school gymnasium where the event was held, and a selection of stations were set up where students could learn about the countries from the information booths they had made, taste global foods, and play a few multicultural games. Parents,

community members and students from other schools came by to participate in the fun and enjoy a tasty treat. The event was a success and Ms. Marsh, and I were so delighted to have had the students as involved as they were. While some had been involved in the food preparation process, others were instrumental in creating decorations, serving the food, and cleaning up afterwards.

In the days that followed, we had students coming up to us and expressing their excitement about their favorite parts of the showcase. This caused me to reflect on the teachings of my education degree when we were taught about the importance of deep learning. Ms. Marsh and I could have organized a schoolwide talk about the importance of cultural diversity, but it would have lacked an immersive component. Through our showcase, students were granted an in-depth learning experience where they could create their own knowledge through research, taste their cooking creations and be exposed to global music. As young teachers, we believe in the importance of positive relationships and cultural harmony, so this showcase was our way of showing leadership in our school while showcasing the hard work of our students. After all, leadership cannot occur without collaboration or dedication.