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McCullough, M., Lavadenz, M.& Martin, S. (1997). Reconceptualizing leadership in culturally diverse settings: A Learning community model. *Educational Leadership and Administration*, 9, 31-42.

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## **Reconceptualizing Leadership in Culturally Diverse Settings: *A Learning Community Model***

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### **Introduction**

Despite the well-intentioned efforts of the major waves of educational reform since the 1980s, these efforts have not been effective in addressing the needs of *all* students, particularly those from culturally and linguistically diverse populations. Our observation from the literature is that systemic reform and effective leadership efforts are rooted in middle class, Eurocentric cultural frames of reference and organizational structures. A Eurocentric perspective omits alternative frames of reference, experiences, and the *funds of knowledge* that many students bring to the educational process (Floyd-Tenery, González, & Moll, 1993; González *et al.*, 1993). In this paper, we attempt to reconceptualize systemic reform and empowering leadership using the lens of sociocultural theory in order to facilitate more inclusive and effective school reform. We present our Learning Community Model as a construct for examining dynamic and holistic contexts for leadership and systemic reform. We conclude by identifying how the model can be used by current practitioners and how it might be applied in the preparation of school leaders and administrators.

## **Development of the Learning Community Model**

The concept for our project emerged in our ongoing dialogue about school reform. What concerned us was that the reform movements have not been successful for *all* students, most notably students of color and students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. As we focused our conversation, we decided that what was missing from the school reform dialogue was a consideration of the sociocultural perspective; this led to our decision to generate a model that would address these issues.

The first stage in the development of the model grew out of an inquiry process which centered on cultural diversity as a rich resource for school reform. We asked questions concerning the failure of school reform, and identified the following factors which should incorporate a broader perspective of effective leadership in culturally diverse settings: (a) the necessity of parent involvement; (b) the importance of linking the community to the school; (c) the need for cultural guides as role models; (d) the inclusion of authentic assessment and action research; and (e) the development and implementation of a theoretical framework linked with a historical perspective regarding cultural diversity.

In the second stage of our work, we identified and defined the tenets of sociocultural theory by reviewing and synthesizing the literature. Within the school reform movements of the last decade, we recognized two important themes—*empowering leadership* and *systemic reform*—as central to authentic change in schools. However, we also recognized that while much has been written for teacher education concerning diversity issues, very little has been developed for educational leadership.

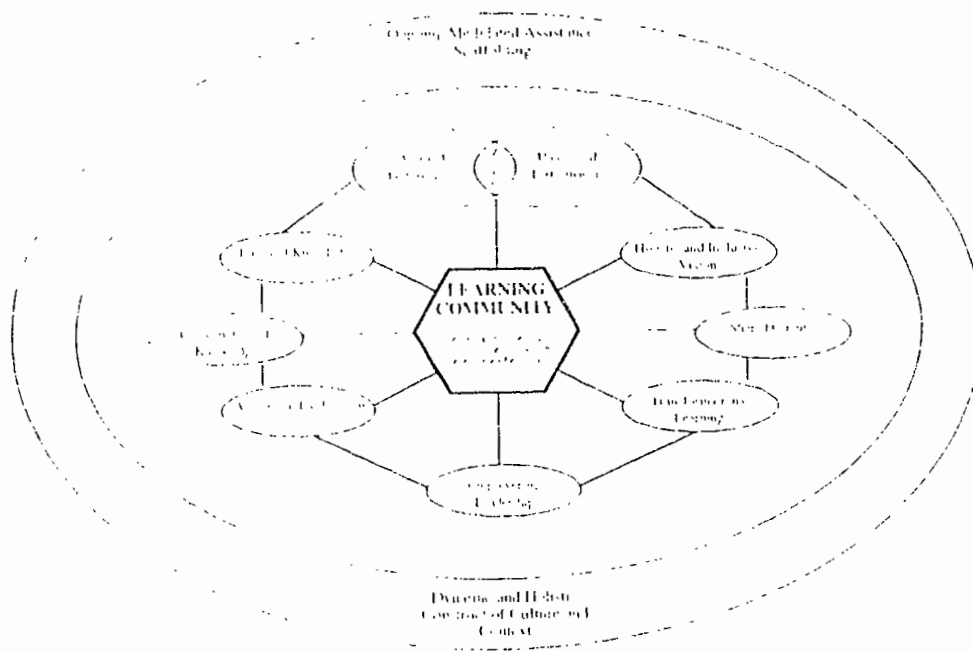
Finally, the process led us to the third stage, in which we linked the tenets of sociocultural theory, empowering leadership, and systemic reform by developing a matrix (see Appendix A: Sociocultural Factors Affecting School Reform in Culturally Diverse Settings). In the process of developing the matrix, we realized the necessity of coming to consensus on the definition of the terms we used within each of the categories. We then explored the following question: How does the sociocultural perspective inform empowering leadership and systemic reform? Thus we generated a new understanding of these two areas, based on the insights of sociocultural theory.

Using the constructivist approach, we collaboratively developed the Learning Community Model (Figure 1). This model serves as a construct for decision-making, resource gathering, and program planning for educational communities in which every member is a contributor. Learning is a social process in which knowledge is constructed,

deconstructed and reconstructed in the exchange of information between novice and expert learners. The main goal of the learning community is success for all in a social context in which learning is a lifelong process. The major support for the learning community comes in the form of providing ongoing mediated assistance or scaffolding, and developing a dynamic and holistic construct of culture and context.

In order for educational reform to take hold and address the needs of *all* students, the entire system must change. We suggest that one way to ensure systemic reform is to view it through the lens of sociocultural theory. Only in this blending of theory and practice, which recognizes the tremendous resource of funds of knowledge and the need for creating a dynamic and holistic construct of culture and context supported by ongoing mediated assistance, can reform thrive. The entire system must become a learning community in order to nurture and support *all* the students and other stakeholders.

Figure 1  
Sociocultural Factors Affecting School Reform



## **Defining Terms: Sociocultural Theory and Empowering Leadership**

Through this process of constructive dialogue, we came to consensus on the following definitions to explain and to integrate the work of systemic reform and empowering leadership as explored through the lens of sociocultural theory:

***Sociocultural Theory.*** Although there is no absolute consensus on the terminology on which sociocultural theory is based, we utilize the conceptual framework that Wertsch, Del Rio, and Alvarez (1995) set forth. In discussing terminology, Wertsch *et al.* acknowledge the various terms for this approach, such as socio-psychological, cultural-historical, socio-cultural-historical, and sociohistorical, which all are based in the Vygotskian heritage. They argue, however, that the term *sociocultural* is the preferred term to describe the appropriation of the Vygotskian heritage.

The primary aim of the sociocultural approach is to provide understandings as to the social and cultural factors which impact teaching and learning in school settings in order to improve educational outcomes for *all* students, especially for ethnic and linguistic minority students. This approach utilizes qualitative analysis to understand the various complex factors that affect school success and failure. Of particular importance is the way specific contexts affect learning. The strengths of this approach are that it is inclusive, recognizing culture as an important variable in learning, and is flexible and adaptable to individual contexts. The limitation of this approach is that it is sophisticated and requires educators, particularly those in leadership positions, to rethink their basic philosophy of education to make changes in structure and culture of the school.

***Tenets of Sociocultural Approach.*** 1. Anthropological Basis of Culture: Although there is divergence as to an exact definition of the word *culture*, anthropologists generally emphasize that culture is: (a) learned rather than innate; (b) shared by a group of people who create a context for individual activity; (c) an adaptation to new and challenging conditions ranging from the environment to power relationships within society; and (d) a dynamic system that has permeable and changing boundaries (Gollnick & Chinn, 1994).

Of particular importance to education are the ideas that culture is learned and shared. Children usually first learn their culture from their parents, families, and home communities. Because culture is shared, it creates a context in which human activity makes sense. The context is

especially powerful because of the familial connections. Generally speaking, a child comes to school with a certain set of assumptions concerning what is appropriate in terms of behaviors, values and beliefs, and also the *meaning* of those behaviors, values and beliefs.

2. Mediation/Assisted Performance: According to Tharp and Gallimore (1988), learning in the sociocultural perspective is assisted performance. Using scaffolding techniques, more competent others guide novice learners in problem solving and tasks. Following the traditional apprenticeship model, the task is not diminished for the novice learner, but the level of assistance moves from being substantial in early stages to minimal and none at all in later stages. In this view, teachers facilitate learning and serve as guides to students. Teachers must be aware of student's unassisted performance level and assisted performance level, and gear mediation and assistance to the level in between the two, which Vygotsky referred to as the *zone of proximal development (ZoPD)*. The ZoPD fluctuates for each child and task; as the child grows and develops, the ZoPD changes according to that development and task. This ZoPD applies to the adult learner in the educational setting as teachers provide assisted performance for students, so must administrators provide assistance for teachers and vice versa.

3. Motivation: From the sociocultural perspective, motivation is inherent in the human condition. Motivation for learning occurs when learning experiences are structured to be authentic and meaningful, and related to real-life tasks and problem solving. Motivation is enhanced in the social, relational dimension of learning, including the relationship between the learner, the more competent other, and the task at hand. Motivation is also enhanced by utilizing learners funds of knowledge and using culturally responsive pedagogy.

4. Learning Communities: Learning does not occur in isolation from the community. A community is based on the core-belief that all members of the community are learners, and that the context for learning has no boundaries. The members of the community work collaboratively to: (a) support the learning process; (b) support each other in pursuit of learning and valuing one another; and (c) value lifelong learning.

5. Constructivism: Based largely on the work of Soviet psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1978), this approach views all learning as social, in which expert learners mediate new learning experiences for the novice learner. The theoretical framework has been most recently applied in educational settings through classroom strategies such as Instructional Conversations (IC) and identifying learners' zones of proximal development. Learning situations, curricula, and activities are "constructed" through a process of dialogue and mediation. The strength of this approach is that

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students are actively involved in the learning process and contribute to the construction of knowledge. The limitation is that there is no precise "formula" for knowledge construction and therefore, the actual implementation of this approach needs to vary in different activity settings. This can be frustrating for classroom teachers who are not well grounded in its theory and methodology.

6. Authenticity: Authenticity in the sociocultural perspective means that *all* aspects of education—the curriculum, school environment, materials, assessment, interactions and relationships—are rooted in real life. All teaching and learning must be authentic and meaningful. Authenticity refers to the connections between structured learning activities and every day problem-solving tasks, mediated by the particular culture and context of the learner and the teacher. Learning is relevant, holistic, concrete and contextualized, as opposed to irrelevant, fragmented, abstract and decontextualized.

7. Teaching and Learning as a Process: Process is the on-going series of actions, events, operations, and relationships that lead to value-added knowledge and growth. All learning is seen as a process, and the process is as important as the product. Additionally, the process of learning is transformational, not merely additive. That is, learning is not simply the sum of various parts, rather the synergy of the learner, the teacher, and the question to be answered. Thus, learning is social and relational. Learners solve new questions and tasks drawing upon their entire histories of experiences by relating to problems to be solved, new ideas, new tasks, and other persons. The interaction between and among the above transforms the individual parts (the learner, the question, the one teaching or leading) in a holistic, integrative, and constructivist manner that creates something new. The process of transformational learning is on-going and lifelong.

8. Funds of Knowledge: The funds of knowledge construct (Moll, Vélez-Ibáñez & González, 1992; Vélez-Ibáñez, 1988) maintains that every student enters school with an individual and community-based history and a set of experiences. Students and their families may have rich life experience in areas such as household management, farming, ranching, mining, repair work, medicine and folk medicine, and construction (Moll, Amantí, Neff & González, 1992; Vélez-Ibáñez & Greenberg, 1992). The combination of these forces are a particular student's funds of knowledge, which can be described as the totality of experiences and home-based knowledge each student brings to school from the home culture (Martin, 1996).

Such an approach is especially significant for ethnic minority, language minority, and immigrant students because they may bring

very different funds of knowledge than students with dominant socioeconomic status (SES). Using the existing funds of knowledge that students bring from their families is important for teachers and administrators. This helps to build a bridge between the home culture and the school culture, and enhances student motivation.

**Systemic Reform.** Schools are considered by many to be the most complex of all social inventions, because of the interplay among organizational structures, management processes, instructional activities, and student achievement (Hanson, 1991). "Our peculiar way of organizing public education in the United States has made change even more difficult—and less apt to yield results" (Finn, 1991, p. 184). Chubb and Hanushek (1990) observe the *layer cake organization pattern* of public schools as part of the problem. The hierarchical nature of school organizations and the three separate levels of government, including local, state, and federal, all compete to set educational policy and govern local schools.

By the late 1980s, the reform attention was directed to the entire education system, focusing on such change variables as leadership, decision making, and organizational culture (Fullan, 1991; Goodlad, 1984; Rosenholtz, 1989; Sizer, 1984). "Yet eight years after being proclaimed a 'nation at risk,' we've eliminated virtually none of the hazardous practices, dangerous ideas, or pointless customs of the education system" (Finn, 1991, p. 185).

The current need for systemic reform demands change and dramatic improvements in student achievement as necessary components of the education agenda in the 1990s (Odden, 1995). The school is at the center of change in the educational system. However, while the local school is a unit of organizational change, the local district, together with the state, are units of system change (Murphy, Hallinger & Mesa, 1985; Odden, 1991). In order for change to occur at the classroom level, change must also occur up and down the entire educational structure. The sociocultural theory suggests that collegial social systems generate greater productivity in change efforts and opportunities for student learning (Joyce, Bennett & Rolheiser-Bennett, 1990). In order to realize lasting change, all members of the school community need the support of the entire school, the school needs the support of the district, and the district needs the support of the county, state, and federal government structures (Odden, 1991). The school also needs the support of the community. The entire system needs to support and form the scaffolding necessary for the change to occur in the classrooms with teachers, students, and parents as partners.

Fullan (1993) suggests that what is needed are coherence-making



strategies at the local level, not the appearance of coherence at the state and national levels. Building communities of learners calls for change in school systems and cultures built on learning for teachers, administrators, and students—the development of professional school cultures (Goodlad, 1990; Joyce, 1990; Joyce & Murphy, 1990; Loucks-Horsely & Stiegelbauer, 1991). The key issue of systemic reform however, must remain excellence in education for *all* students (Finn, 1991; Tye, 1992).

**Empowering Leadership.** “The school is an organization, and organizations change more effectively when their heads play active roles in helping to lead improvement” (Fullan, 1991, p. 152). Educational change is a socio-political process and a fact of life that involves loss, anxiety, and struggle; change is a process, not an event (Hall & Hord, 1987). Significant change is accomplished through empowering leadership in which the leader takes an active role in empowering the players in the change process, taking a developmental approach, and pursuing multiple lines of involvement simultaneously (Anderson, 1989; Fullan, 1991).

The effective schools research indicates that schools will be successful agents of change if the following are in place: strong leadership, a safe climate, academic achievement, high expectations for students and teachers, and a monitoring and reward system (Finn, 1991; Lemlech, 1990). The site principal is a central player in school change efforts: a manager of the school culture, a disseminator of vital information, a resource gatherer, and a power and reward broker (Hanson, 1991; Leithwood & Jantzi, 1990; Marsh, 1988; Schlechty, 1990). Teacher/administrator networks, collaborative cultures, supportive policy makers, and high quality ongoing assistance all need to be established to bring about systemic change.

Leadership is a critical function in the change process that combines consistent pressure, monitoring, and support, along with ongoing assistance and proper resources to build the scaffolding necessary to further the learning of all community members. By sharing in empowering leadership, teachers are more involved in running and managing schools and equally accountable for results. Information, knowledge, power, and rewards must be developed and shared at the school level and set within a systemic reform context in order to create the schools the children and society need (Odden, 1995).

## **Learning Community Model**

The following section articulates the processes by which empowering leadership and systemic reform are reconceptualized through the Learn-

ing Community Model. In order to assist in developing educational communities that link systemic reform and empowering leadership with the sociocultural theory, we created the Learning Community Model. The model serves as a construct for decision-making, resource gathering, and program planning for educational communities in which every member is a learner. The main goal of the learning community is success for all in a social context in which learning is a lifelong process. The major support for the learning community comes in the form of providing ongoing mediated assistance or scaffolding, and developing a dynamic and holistic construct of culture and context.

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The recent, dramatic demographic changes in California indicate growth in the numbers of students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. This has challenged school and community leaders to be more responsive to their needs in order to create school climates that not only *value* diversity, but also *incorporate* diversity into all aspects of the decision-making processes of school life. We believe that the tenets of sociocultural theory are the key to cultural and linguistic incorporation for school leaders.

In order for educational reform to take hold and address the needs of *all* students, the entire system must change. Systemic reform thrives and is equitable when: (a) there is an integration of theory and practice; (b) the funds of knowledge of all contributors are viewed as resources to the educational setting; and (c) the dynamic and holistic constructs of culture and context are supported by ongoing mediated assistance. The following section addresses the implications and application of the model for practitioners and administrative preparation programs.

***Implications of the Model.*** School climate and culture are affected by administrative policies and by close personal contact with the processes of teaching and learning. Sergiovanni & Starratt (1993) suggest that administrators and teachers must work together to transform the learning environment into a more user-friendly environment that communicates care and respect, and fosters a community of learners. We contend this type of environment cannot be created unless the administrators and teachers recognize and value the funds of knowledge of all stakeholders and implement processes such as scaffolding that build upon the gifts and talents of all members.

Therefore, the Learning Community Model has promise in responding to the above concerns by combining the following three fields of literature which have not been previously linked: sociocultural theory, leadership, and systemic reform. Our model links the literature in order to identify helpful factors to assist administrators in working with others

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to create educational environments that respect *all* cultures and focus on the success of *all* students. The model has implications in two areas: implications for practitioners and implications for administrative preparation programs.

***Implications for Practitioners.*** The implementation of the Learning Community Model calls for collaboration between administrators, teachers, parents, and students in the following:

- ◆ Administrators must make a paradigm shift from leader to learner;
- ◆ Administrators must become students of culture, both the formal and informal culture represented by the stakeholders in the local community;
- ◆ Administrators must provide avenues for the sharing of cultural knowledge and experiences among all stakeholders;
- ◆ Administrators must work collaboratively to create a vision inclusive of *all* stakeholders;
- ◆ Administrators must use funds of knowledge in the process of facilitating change, particularly in the area of mediated assistance and scaffolding, applied to all stakeholders in the school/district setting;
- ◆ Administrators must be proactive in recruiting, hiring, training, and providing needed services for guides/role models that are reflective of the local community to serve in leadership positions and on decision-making teams;
- ◆ Administrators must focus ongoing assessment and evaluation through the lens of cultural diversity to insure success for *all* students;
- ◆ Administrators must work to build strong traits of trust, communication, and empowerment among all stakeholders;
- ◆ Administrators must structure the teacher/staff evaluation process to hold all members of the staff accountable for assisting all students in the construction of knowledge;
- ◆ Administrators must practice reflective leadership and share the lessons learned with others.

***Implications for Administrative Preparation Programs.*** The implications of the Learning Community Model for administrator preparation programs include the following:

- ◆ The curriculum in leadership courses would include the study and application of the sociocultural theory;
- ◆ Programs would provide opportunities for future educational leaders to practice reflection focused on identifying underlying beliefs of cultural diversity;
- ◆ Programs would provide opportunities for administration students to conduct action research on topics that incorporate cultural diversity;
- ◆ Programs would add the study of cultures into the curriculum of administrative course work;

- ◆ Professors of educational administration courses would model a constructivist process based on dialogue, inquiry, and the sharing of knowledge;
- ◆ The curriculum for educational leaders would incorporate a study of and strategies to support community based change agency.

## Conclusion

At the center of the Learning Community Model is the individual. Respect for all the individual brings to the schoolhouse door is the foundation of the model, based on the tenets of sociocultural theory. We believe it is important for every member of the school environment to be perceived as a learner and be involved in mutual dialogue. As Meier (1995) advises,

...schools are the conscious embodiment of the way we want our next generation to understand their world and their place in it. If mutual respect is the bedrock condition necessary for democracy, then it must be the foundation of schooling. (p. 135)

The democratic principles embodied in the tenets of sociocultural theory raise the consciousness of school leaders in order to reframe schooling practices for culturally and linguistically diverse students. We concur with Meier (1995) who states: "our schools must be labs for learning about learning," places that foster "reflective experimentation" (p. 140) where teachers, students, administrators, and parents are active participants in the change process.

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**Appendix A**

**Table 1**  
**Sociocultural Factors Affecting School Reform**  
**in Culturally Diverse Settings**

| <i>Tenets of Sociocultural Theory</i>     | <i>Sociocultural Theory and Systemic Reform</i>  | <i>Sociocultural Theory and the Role of the Empowering Leadership</i>   |
|---|--|---|
| Anthropological basis of culture/ context | The change process is dynamic, on-going, and systemic.<br>The change process is embedded in the local context and culture.<br>Stakeholder input informs the process of building community.<br>Sharing of values, rituals, symbols. | Collects and analyzes a variety of data to gain and share understanding of the learning community.<br>Uses qualitative methods to gain the insider's (emic) perspective (elicits the voice of all stakeholders').<br>Shares leadership and decision-making.<br>Facilitates cross-cultural and intercultural dialogue.<br>Models and promotes cultural competency. |
| Mediation/ assisted performance           | All planning is done collaboratively.<br>Curriculum and pedagogy are responsive to diversity.<br>The apprenticeship relationship (more competent other and novice) guides the reform process.                                      | Communicates effectively.<br>Seeks input and collaboration with staff, parents, community, and others.<br>Empowers others to be leaders.<br>Provides appropriate resources  |
| Motivation                                | Common purpose and vision engages <i>all</i> stakeholders.<br>Motivation is intrinsic to systemic reform when it is meaningful, authentic, and relevant.   | Emphasizes achievement for <i>all</i> students.<br>Is animated by a vision that is that is inclusive, reflects the local context and culture, and is shared.<br>Recognizes, understands, and acts on the belief that motivation is inherent in the human condition.   |

| <i>Tenets of Sociocultural Theory</i> | <i>Sociocultural Theory and Systemic Reform</i>   | <i>Sociocultural Theory and the Role of the Empowering Leadership</i>  |
|---------------------------------------|---|--|
| Learning communities                  | <p>Systemic, sustained reformed is social and communal in nature.</p> <p>Reform applies to all stakeholders.</p> <p>Everyone is a change agent.</p> <p>Each component of the system informs, supports, and empowers the others.</p> | <p>Challenges and removes boundaries that prohibit the social and communal nature of the teaching/ learning process.</p> <p>Transforms structures to be inclusive of all stakeholders.</p> <p>Mediates conflict effectively.</p> |
| Constructivism                        | <p>Change is a social process.</p> <p>Change process evolves and grows based on dialogue, inquiry, sharing of knowledge and relationship between and among stakeholders.</p> <p>Incorporates pedagogic diversity.</p>               | <p>Promotes professional growth as mutuality.</p> <p>Is dialogic and collaborative decision-making.</p> <p>Facilitates a collaborative and collegial climate.</p>  |
| Authenticity                          | <p>High expectations are relevant and based on real needs.</p> <p>Curriculum reflects and responds to real life issues, concerns, and experiences.</p> <p>Assessment is performance based and needs based.</p>                      | <p>Practices value-added leadership resulting in higher levels of commitment and performance.</p> <p>Employs action research to effect real change.</p>  |



*Reconceptualizing Leadership in Culturally Diverse Settings*

| <i>Tenets of Sociocultural Theory</i> | <i>Sociocultural Theory and Systemic Reform</i>   | <i>Sociocultural Theory and the Role of the Empowering Leadership</i>   |
|---------------------------------------|---|---|
| Teaching and learning as a process    | The change process:<br>Is transformative and additive.<br>Is responsive to the needs of society.<br>Is responsive to technological growth.<br>Implements cooperative learning strategies.                                       | Establishes context for teachers and students to work together for continuous improvement.<br>Is committed to the belief that change is a process and not an event.<br>Continues to learn from others.  |
| Funds of knowledge                    | Recognition and respect of all people.<br>Reform process utilizes the individual and collective strengths of individuals and groups.<br>Power for change is in networking, collaboration, and in critical friend relationships. | Uses site-based decision making.<br>Capitalizes and builds on the strengths of individuals and groups.<br>Values and encourages networks of exchange between and among stakeholders.<br>Empowers all stakeholders to bring/use their funds of knowledge to the setting. |