Written by Julie Desmond
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When the State of Minnesota tests schoolchildren each fall, they break down the results in numerous ways in order to determine who is learning and which schools need to step up their programs. According to Michelle Deziel, the results consistently show that educational resources are not getting to the kids who need them the most. And educating children, according to Deziel, is a key to long term success in bridging the achievement gap between cultures and overcoming racism in everyday life.

Deziel is a licensed school teacher and Director of Diversity Education for Cultural Perspectives and Associates, an organization whose goal is to bring cultural awareness to work and school settings. Through the extensive research of owner Verona Mitchell and the Cultural Perspectives organization, along with her personal experience, Deziel explains that the achievement gap in schools has a wide range of contributors. One of these is cultural; in many schools, the group labeled “English Learner” has the most difficulty scoring well on these tests.

Educating children seems like an obvious place to start closing the fissure between those who achieve and those who fail. But what about changing the attitudes of people already set in their ways? Can people from diverse cultures truly work together and succeed in school, careers and life? The answer is yes, of course. According to Deziel, there are ways even adults can break out of racist patterns and move toward a better understanding of the people we work and learn alongside.

“Immerse yourself in various cultures,” says Deziel, who describes herself as a person of color. She uses the Hmong New Year celebration, which is open to everyone, as a good example of people sharing their traditions with others. People tend to stay in the comfort zone of the familiar: with people who look, think, behave alike. But there’s a rich world of culture out there. Deziel suggests trying out a Mexican grocery store in St. Paul, or attending a cultural event.

In the workplace, an open mind – and stomach - can go a long way toward connecting cultures. People enjoy eating, Deziel points out. Planning a pot luck where co-workers bring a favorite dish can launch a dialogue about families and traditions and more. Socializing with co-workers outside the workplace is another effective way to move toward a better relationship across all kinds of divides.

Deziel recommends people take small steps and take chances sometimes. “It can take time to feel really comfortable,” she says. “But it is worth the investment.”

Deziel will be leading a conference, Overcoming Racism, in November at Metro State University. To learn more about Cultural Perspectives and Associates, visit www.culturalpa.com .

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