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## Using a Book Club to Confront Attitudinal Barriers and Other “isms”



[From left to right are Marlene Penn, Family Technical Assistance Coordinator and former Executive Director Of the Family Support Organization of Burlington County, Janet Moore, Family Support Partner, Cassandra Gordon, Early Childhood Coordinator, Toni Tramontana, Executive Director of the Family Support Organization of Burlington County, Kathy Bitzer, Family Coordinator, and Susan Aitken, Family Support Partner]

### Overview

For the past nine years, the National Center for Cultural Competence (NCCC) has assisted health care, mental health care, and other human service organizations and systems to conduct organizational self-assessment processes. A review of these data reveal that attitudinal barriers are a frequently cited obstacle to achieving cultural and linguistic competence in organizations, systems and among their personnel.

The NCCC embraces a conceptual framework that views the values and attitudes of an organization and its personnel as essential components to achieving cultural competence, (see [NCCC Web site Frameworks & Guiding Principles at http://gucchd.georgetown.edu/nccc/framework.html](http://gucchd.georgetown.edu/nccc/framework.html)). Approaches to confront attitudinal barriers in an open, honest and supportive manner, and chart a course for

change, remain among the most difficult paths on the journey to achieve cultural and linguistic competency. The NCCC is spotlighting the Family Support Organization of Burlington County, New Jersey for developing a promising practice to confront and address attitudinal barriers and other “isms” within the system of care for children and youth with serious social, emotional, and behavioral disorders and their families. The organization uses a book club as a forum and catalyst for learning and change. The book club:

- Has proven to be an effective approach to learn about bias, discrimination, prejudice, stereotyping, and the “isms”.
- Promoted positive growth for both the staff and the organization as a whole.
- Was used as a springboard to facilitate organizational change.

The Family Support Organization of Burlington County (hotlink to <http://www.fsoburlco.org/about.php>) adopted the idea of starting a book club from their mentors at the Federation of Families for Children’s Mental Health (hotlink to <http://www.ffcmh.org/>).

The Family Support Organization of Burlington County is the *family voice* within the Burlington Partnership, a system of care grant site. The organization, a private non-profit, is funded by the Substance Abuse Mental Health Services Administration, U.S. Department of Health & Human Services and the New Jersey Department of Human Services. The staff of the Family Support Organization of Burlington County is comprised of parents or guardians of children who experience emotional, behavioral, or mental health challenges. The Family Support Organization:

- Brings a uniquely family-oriented perspective to the system of care.
- Establishes a culture of trust with families because staff members have “walked in their shoes”.
- Offers a listening ear and provides support, education, advocacy, and training to families.
- Assists families to navigate the mental health, juvenile justice, court, or educational systems.

The goal of the Family Support Organization is to empower families on their journey towards self- advocacy and provide opportunities for leadership within the family movement.

<b>Family Support Organization of Burlington County</b>
The mission of the Family Support Organization of Burlington County’ is to provide direct, community-based, family-to-family support to children and families with special emotional, behavioral, and mental health challenges who are enrolled in New Jersey’s Children’s Behavioral Health Services with emphasis on families, and resources for families; and to work collaboratively as a system partner in planning, organizing, delivering, and coordinating needed and appropriate care to individual children and their families.

**Books - a catalyst for learning and change**

In this time of political correctness, people are reticent to discuss issues associated with stereotyping, bias, and prejudice between and among cultural groups. Discrimination by age, gender, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, national origin, class, religion, and disability, whether perceived or actual, often evoke such deeply rooted emotions that

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people cannot even engage in or have a civil discussion. Communication is often stuck in a place where people take sides, make accusations, or keep silent due to fear of consequences or perhaps thinking that talking about it will not help at all. Adverse consequences can occur when organizations and systems are not proactive in addressing the “isms”. Such consequences may range from (1) hostile and unhealthy work environments, dissatisfaction among services providers, other personnel and volunteers; (2) frequent turnover in personnel; (3) dissatisfaction among youth, families and other consumers receiving services and supports; (4) compromised capacity to deliver quality services; and (5) in some cases, litigation.

There are a variety of ways to learn about the experiences of the many cultural groups within the United States and throughout the world. Learning about different cultures through reading is an intimate and personal experience. Autobiographies, biographies, historical accounts, novels and illustrated books can educate, inspire, and even affect change in people’s attitudes and behaviors. A book club offers an excellent forum that allows these individual learning experiences to be shared with others.

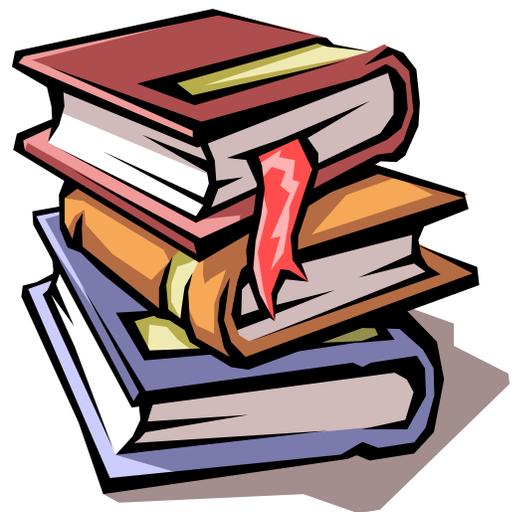
Reading supports learning because:

- It offers an opportunity to view the world through a lens other than your own.
- It can challenge and expand one’s world view.
- Stories can express deep and complex issues in ways that are often simple and in many instances entertaining.

These personal experiences can indeed be the catalyst for change in personal perspectives and attitudes. For example, reading a book such as *To Kill a Mockingbird* can have a profound effect on people who otherwise may not be inclined to discuss the issues brought to life in this classic American novel.

### **A book club idea becomes reality**

Marlene Penn, the former Executive Director of the Family Support Organization of Burlington County, first introduced the idea of a book club to the organization’s small, diverse staff because of some uneasiness about issues associated with serving gay and lesbian populations. The staff embraced the idea, but not everyone enjoyed reading. To address this issue, the Family Support Organization chose (1) books that were easy to read; and (2) books that are available in alternative formats, such as books-on-tape or books that had been made into movies, so participants could rent them. Additionally, ample time was given for participants to finish the book.



Ms. Penn scheduled the first book club meeting during the lunch hour, a time that facilitated maximum participation among the staff. A poster board went up for staff to write questions for the club to address. Ms. Penn facilitated the discussion for the first

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book club meeting. When interviewed for this article, Ms. Penn stated, “We didn’t talk too much about character development! Instead, we talked about how this book related to our work, the professionals and families we work with and their diverse cultures.”

Positive growth for all participants was their desired outcome; this shaped the approach and format for the book club. Staff wanted to learn how to think and feel differently about the “isms”, particularly discrimination, bias, and stereotyping against gays and lesbians. However, staff decided to begin with a book that did not focus on gay and lesbian lifestyles and issues. Ms. Penn indicated that the staff decided that it was better for them to get their feet wet with the format of a book club before delving into the content areas that were sensitive for them.

The staff selected *The Education of Little Tree* as its first book. The staff was interested in this book because most of them knew very little about the American Indian experience in the United States. Through discussion, it was soon evident that although the staff knew little about this culture, there were many things in the book to which they could relate personally, such as the significance of grandparents in the family.

As hoped for, the success of their first book club meeting empowered the staff to take on a book on gay experiences. The staff chose *This too shall pass*, one book in a series by the author E. Lynn Harris, a work of fiction that explores the experiences of bisexual and gay men within the African American community. During deliberations to select a book, one staff member reflected that there are some very different issues for gay and lesbians within the African American community, when compared with the majority culture. Ms. Tramontana, the current Executive Director of the organization, reflected, “this staff member taught me something just with that comment”, that race and ethnicity impact the gay and lesbian experience in America. Family Support Organization staff found it was a great opportunity to learn how to view the world through a lens other than their own. Ms. Tramontana reflected on the results and indicated that the experience “seemed to help move people in a positive direction”.

### **Impact**

The Family Support Organization staff shared that they really enjoyed the experience and benefited from reading and discussing these cultural issues together. Ms. Penn stated, “It helped to move us to a different place of understanding, things that we would never have experienced in our lifetime. Our conversations didn’t end at the discussion group. The issues we talked about helped us better understand family members and each other.”

The Family Support Organization found this approach to be a terrific way to promote personal and professional growth and to continue the journey to achieve cultural competence within their organization and the system of care. Ms. Penn said “The book club helped to give us an opportunity to develop insight and learning in cultural competence.”

### **A great idea ignites and grows into something bigger!**

Not only has the book club been a successful learning tool for the Family Support Organization, but also it is being duplicated yet again --this time by the Cultural Competence Committee of the Burlington Partnership. The Community Partnership is one of approximately 60 system of care communities for children with serious emotional disorders and their families, funded by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Center for Mental Health Services, Child, Adolescent & Family Branch (see <http://www.mentalhealth.org/publications/allpubs/KEN95-0016/default.asp>). Ms. Penn reported, "Once we did this, a great thing happened! Our grant site has a cultural competence committee and they really liked the idea. Now the committee has purchased a few hundred books to share with the community!" The Cultural Competence Committee of the Burlington Partnership adapted the structure of the book club to their own needs and preferences, including:

- providing a facilitator to run the group who is knowledgeable of the content area of that book;
- using small groups as a structure to facilitate discussion;
- creating structures for book club members to telephone, e-mail, or mail questions and comments to help set the agenda for each book club meeting;
- offering flexible time schedules for meetings during the day or evening; and
- offering flexible locations for the meetings throughout the community.

These last two characteristics ensure access for the greatest number of interested participants including families, youth, community members, service providers and other constituency groups concerned with children and youth with serious emotional disorders and their families.

## Start-up Strategies

The following strategies are taken from the suggestions of Marlene Penn, New Jersey Children's Behavioral Healthcare Services; Toni Tramontana, Family Support Organization; and adapted by Tawara Goode and Clare Dunne, National Center for Cultural Competence.

### Invest Time and Enthusiasm

- Carve out the time to read and to meet in a group. Work to sustain a certain level of excitement and enthusiasm.
- Celebrate successes and acknowledge *breakthroughs* in attitude, insight and behavior.

### Create a safe environment and embrace a culture of trust

- Establish ground rules, group norms or a covenant to ensure a safe environment for honest and authentic communication. Each book club will go through a process in which it defines what the rules, guidelines, values and principles that will be the basis for how the book club operates.
- Keep the agenda open so that members are able to share their concerns, issues, and personal victories and struggles. Remember that members may be reticent to share due to the sensitive nature of the content
- Book members must earn other's trust. Trust can take a long time to develop: demonstrating honor and respect for cultural differences helps build and sustain trusting relationships. Remember, too, that what constitutes trustworthiness is culturally bound.

### Share the Leadership

- Create an inclusive culture and structure that encourages members to participate in a meaningful way. Be mindful of power and the dynamics of difference. This can influence whose views carry the most weight in the group.
- Involve all book club members in decisions about which books to read. Some book clubs may begin with choices that are not as emotionally difficult or uncomfortable for the members. Other groups may decide to take a subject head on, set up parameters and nurture an environment in which the group can learn. The key issue is that the each book club group should decide for itself.

### Assure Flexibility

- Convene meetings at times and in places that are accessible. Offer on-line chats or discussion groups for those members who prefer this as an alternate means of participation
- Book club members can still benefit from engaging in the conversation, even if they have not completed the book. The issues raised by the book may have significant implications at both the personal and professional levels. Discussion of these serves as a springboard for learning and change — the real goal.

The particular book club highlighted in this article was housed in an organization that focused on systems of care for children’s mental health. The information and suggestions presented here can be adapted to meet the unique needs of organizations concerned with health, mental health, social services, higher education, business, etc. The NCCC recommends this as a promising practice to address attitudinal barriers and bias within organizations.

**Book club selections**

*The Education of Little Tree* by Forrest Carter & Rennard Strickland

*And This Too Shall Pass* by E. Lynn Harris

*The Color of Water A Black Man’s Tribute to His White Mother* by James McBride

*Sister of My Heart* by Chirtra Banerjee Divakaruni

**For more information, contact:**

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