

# The Leadership Journey Begins Within

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*The more things change, the more they stay the same.*

—Anonymous

## **GETTING CENTERED**

In selecting this book, you have indicated your interest in education, leadership, and/or issues of equity and diversity. Most likely you are regarded as a formal or a nonformal leader in your school or community. So, what is it that caused you to open this book and read this far? We invite you to record your initial thoughts to these questions. Your responses will serve as important guides through this journey with us.

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Though educators and students may be in the same classroom and school at the same time, very often we are strangers to one another. Where underachievement is prevalent in a school, the cultural differences between educator and students are often represented by contrasting experiences, values, beliefs, language, socioeconomics, and worldviews. Educators and students treat one another differently because of the lack of shared experiences.

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The reality of different experiences is exacerbated by the fact that many people in our society still live segregated lives based on race/ethnicity, class, and linguistic patterns. To be effective cross-culturally, we must fully understand that cultural realities are sets of lived, learned experiences. Lisa Delpit (1996) eloquently expressed it with these words, *All the students that we teach are “Other People’s Children.”* Since we cannot live each other’s cultures, it becomes imperative that we begin our leadership journey by looking inward to ourselves and understanding our reactions to people who are culturally different from us. To understand ourselves as cultural beings is a necessary step to effectively teach “Other Peoples’ Children.”

This chapter is designed for you to reflect on your leadership role in your school. In the next few pages, we invite you to begin this journey toward cultural proficiency by:

- taking a look at your school and your reactions to what you see
- considering the equity issues that abide in your school
- considering access and achievement gaps as leadership issues
- viewing aspects of current legislation such as No Child Left Behind (NCLB) as useful tools

### **TAKING A LOOK AT MY SCHOOL AND WHAT I SEE (AND DON’T SEE)**

As school leaders, we inherit schools and school districts that are influenced by social, political, and economic forces not readily apparent. Most likely you began your education career as a classroom teacher and entered your first school with unbridled enthusiasm to do your very best work. In your preparation program, you took the required history and philosophy courses, and may or may not have fully related what was taught in those courses to be forces that impinge on your school and your classroom. Your first school assignment may have ranked anywhere along a continuum of being “extremely pleased” to “extremely displeased.” Things spoken and unspoken made you react to students and colleagues in your school.

Envision yourself driving to and from your current school. Take note of the neighborhood and the services present, or not present, for your students. Also, note whether or not you would live in the neighborhoods of your students. Do the visible elements of the neighborhood environment cause you to judge your students and their parents? Underlying the visible elements of our school communities are unapparent forces that make even more impact on our students, our schools, and ourselves. These seemingly

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invisible historical forces contribute to the sense of privilege or deprivation experienced in our schools that creates stress for your students, their parents or guardians, and for you. These invisible forces are the “equity issues” that serve as the great unspoken in our profession as well as in society at large. The commonly used metaphor to describe these invisible forces is “equity issues are the elephant in the middle of the room that we pretend not to see.”

#### *Reflection*

Describe your school environment. Describe the community outside the school’s boundary. What do you think and feel about the effect of these environments? Please use the space below to record your thoughts and feelings.

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### ARE THERE “EQUITY ISSUES” IN YOUR SCHOOL?

How much do you know about equity issues in your school or in schools throughout our country? To what extent are historical events of inequity present in your school today? Are students in your school well served by the academic and cocurricular programs? As you read this section, keep these questions before you and use the space at the end to record your responses. Remember, one of the major purposes of this book is to become increasingly aware of your reactions to people whose life experiences may be different from yours.

Reaction to equity issues is often dependent on one’s own experiences as a student. Those of us who have benefited from the current school structure may have a reaction that is different from those of us who were marginalized or made invisible. The twin topics of universal public education and equity in education have yielded very different experiences for cultural groups of students both historically and currently.

Miscommunication and stress among educators can often be traced to how well or poorly people felt served in their own school experiences. Similarly, educators who have been well served in our school systems often are at odds with parents and other community members who have been less well served. Irrespective of your prior personal experiences, to be

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a school leader today, knowledge of the historical context of access and equity issues will provide an important context on which to build your vision for what our schools can and must be.

Two expressed values in our democracy not yet fully realized are universal public education through high school and equitable educational opportunities. Mistakenly thought by many educators to be a requirement in all fifty states, required education through high school or age eighteen is a post-World War II phenomenon that continues to unfold across the country (Hudson, 1999; Kousser, 1984). The National Center for Educational Statistics (2005) reported that as of 2002, twenty-seven states have compulsory education requirements to the attainment of age sixteen.

Progress toward universal education is intertwined with the advancement in equitable treatment and equal outcomes for students based on gender, race, ethnicity, language, and ableness also has been evolving. Legal issues such as *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education* (1954) and *Serrano v. Priest* (1971, 1976, 1977) (as cited in Townley & Schmeider-Ramirez, 2007) set in motion processes designed to remedy inequities intentionally structured into our society and, consequently, our school systems. Executive measures such as the order issued by President Eisenhower in 1967 that sent U.S. paratroopers to insure the integration of Central High School, Little Rock, Arkansas, and legislative measures such as the 1964 Civil Rights Act were intended to confront historical inequities. While dismantling the legal barriers to segregation has been a monumental achievement, having schools be successful for all students is a dream still deferred for many.

Prominent researchers and social commentators have pressed the issue for equity in our schools for two generations. Edmonds (1979) identified correlates for schools effective for all students, yet we continue to “discover” those factors as new. Hilliard (1991) challenged us and asked if we had “the will” to educate all children. Kozol (1991; 2005; 2007) continues to describe what is happening in too many schools with the terms “shame” and “savage inequalities.” Berliner (2005) makes a compelling and chilling case for the intransigence of poverty and its effect on our schools, educational policy, and society. Importantly, Berliner (2005) illustrates the intersection of poverty *and* race/ethnicity that undercuts the notion prevalent in some professional development circles that the achievement gap is only a socioeconomic issue.

### *Reflection*

Take a few moments and consider the questions posed at the beginning of this section and repeated here: How much do you know about

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equity issues in your school or in schools throughout our country? To what extent are historical events of inequity present in your school today? Are students in your school well served by the academic and cocurricular programs? Please record your responses in the space below.

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### CONFRONTING THE “GAPS” AS A LEADERSHIP ISSUE

At the dawn of the twenty-first century, we are now faced with the challenge to lead schools in ways that provide equitable opportunities irrespective of students’ cultural memberships. Schools are naturally heterogeneous to address issues of equity. We bring together students from different cultural groups of race, socioeconomic status, gender, and sexual orientation with the intent to provide quality education. Bridging achievement gaps is a complex undertaking that requires leaders who have knowledge of the social dynamics within society and our schools that foster disparities.

Lay people and educators similarly mention the achievement gap as though it is the single phenomenon of test scores. For that reason, we use the term “educational gaps” throughout this book. Educational achievement is comprised of two components within schools’ control—(1) schools providing access to high quality curriculum and instruction to all students, and (2) outcome measures that assess student achievement. To illustrate the frailty of relying on outcome measures alone, one has only to examine the work of early researchers such as Coleman (1966) and Jencks (Jencks, Smith, Acland, & Bane, 1972) who pointed to the difference in African Americans and white students’ performance and implicated genetic inferiority, poverty, and lack of family support as the reasons for underachievement. In effect, they held that something was wrong with the students, their families, or their cultures. Not addressing systemic access disparities of high quality educational programs, experienced teachers, and equitable school funding resulted in a continuance of the status quo of some students being well served and others less well, if at all.

The reality is that school systems across the country have seldom treated students in an equitable manner. Systemic inequities predate the landmark *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education* (1954) that was to end

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“separate but equal”; however, disparities continue to persist in the form of current funding inequities in many states even today. Funding alone, however, will not create a level playing field. A fundamental change in the way that many students are educated must occur or we will lose another generation of youth to poverty and/or lives of crime.

Our PreK–12 (pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade) student population in the U.S. is growing steadily with the greatest growth being demographic groups who have been underserved historically. Predictably, students of color and English Learners will soon comprise 40 percent of all students in our nation’s PreK–12 schools. In many schools and districts these populations are 90–100 percent of the student population, as patterns of segregation seem to grow. In contrast, the educator population remains overwhelmingly white, middle class, and female. Therefore, the reality is that the primary culture of U.S. schools continues to reflect a Eurocentric, middle class, and standard English speaking paradigm (Milner IV, 2007). Students who enter our schools and share the values, beliefs, socioeconomic status, behaviors, worldview, language, and degree of ableness that most closely align with this dominant paradigm tend to be most successful. The question we must ask ourselves as school leaders and answer in meaningful ways is, *How do we meet the academic and social needs of young people who enter our schools with a different set of values, beliefs, socioeconomic experiences, behaviors, worldview, home languages, and degrees of ableness?*

As you think about your school, what inequities do you think might exist? How do you describe the behavior of formal and nonformal leaders in addressing inequities? How do you describe your behavior? Please use the space below to record your responses.

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#### NCLB AS A LEADERSHIP TOOL

Selected aspects of No Child Left Behind (NCLB; 2002) can serve as a tool to support access and equity efforts. NCLB as the current version of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act has made the general public more aware of differential educational opportunity and achievement patterns that exist in and among our schools and communities. Within our

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schools, we now have the opportunity to discuss and analyze student achievement and access issues as part of our everyday educational practice. Resistance and selective blindness that existed a few years ago is being replaced in some schools as faculty come together to examine student achievement and access issues that previously had been the “elephant in the middle of the room.” Though resistance continues, thoughtful and committed educational leaders are skillfully using NCLB as a pretext for addressing achievement gap issues.

The oft-touted achievement gap is, in reality, a multifaceted outcome measure of gaps in access to education. The light that NCLB has shined on differential achievement patterns now points to multiple achievement gaps. Achievement gaps differentiated by race/ethnicity, gender, class, language, and degree of physical and mental ableness are now highlighted in the popular media. The focus on different aspects of achievement gaps has rekindled interest in examining who gets suspended, expelled, and otherwise excluded from “regular” classrooms. The examination of who attends school regularly as well as who drops out or is “pushed out” is being undertaken by schools nationwide. Data such as disparities in achievement patterns, dropout rates, and enrollment in higher order courses are powerful when used as indicators of access barriers that exist within the school. However, it takes the courageous leader to be able to change the focus from “what is wrong with the student” to “what is it we need to do differently to meet students needs.”

We propose a process of developing an intentional leadership perspective guided by personally and internally asking you the following questions:

1. Who am I, a school leader, as a cultural being?
2. What are my values, beliefs, behaviors, language, class, race/ethnicity, and worldview?
3. What values, beliefs, behavior, language, class, race/ethnicity, and worldview do the various students bring to my classroom/school?
4. How does my culture affect the students who come to my classroom/school?
5. How will the students’ cultures affect me?
6. What must I do when my culture and the students’ culture is different?

Your responses to these questions become the basis for the cultural autobiography you will write in Chapter 3. The reflections and personal

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interviews you will complete in Chapters 4–6 will deepen your understanding of those culturally different from you and why you regard them as you do. You will experience your reflections, your interviews, and your final assembling of this information as a deeply personal and liberating educational journey. You will come to know yourself even better, to understand the basis for your values and beliefs, and to be intentional about being the leader you want to be.

### DEFINITIONS OF KEY TERMS

Understanding key terms is important to effective communication. Do you recall your first year teaching and the first parent night or parent-teacher conference and how you rattled off terms and acronyms that the parents/guardians didn't seem to know? You may have used terms such as “standards-based assessment” or “polynomial fractions” or “continuous progress.” Acronyms that may have tripped off your tongue could have been ELD, EL, IEP, or NCTE. Yes, of course, each profession has its own terminology and acronyms.

Cultural proficiency has terms to be defined, too. From the very beginning of our work together, Ray held that “the ultimate power in society is the power to define.” For that reason, you might ask, why do we take space and time to define seemingly common terms? The answer is because some educators and laypeople choose to be culturally blind about equity and diversity-related perspectives and derisively dismiss them as “politically correct.” We experience two uses of political correctness: (1) people in our profession who have no interest in learning how to be successful with some cultural groups of students and use political correctness as a reason not to change and (2) people who mask their ineffectiveness through use of *au courant* words and phrases but display little or no commitment to the deeper values of access and equity. We find that, though the motivation of the speakers may be dissimilar, their impact on students' education is similarly ineffective. Therefore, we offer the following key terms and definitions for our use in schools.

**Culture:** We define culture as involving far more than ethnic or racial differences. Culture is the set of practices and beliefs shared by members of a particular group that distinguish that group from other groups. Culture includes all characteristics of human description including age, gender, socioeconomic status, geography, ancestry, religion, language, history, sexual orientation, physical and mental level of ableness, occupation, and other affiliations.

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**Cultural Informancy:** This reflects our experience of having cross-cultural relationships that are authentic and trusting and allow for mutual learning and feedback that leads to personal growth.

**Demographic Groups:** Due to the historical stigma that continues to impact our communities and schools, we use the term “demographic group” in place of the term “subgroup.” Every few years the eugenics debate and terms such as subspecies and related uses of the prefix “sub” are used in racist, discriminatory ways. We find the term “demographic group” to be more precise and accurate.

**Dominant Culture:** It should be noted that the dominant culture paradigm that permeates schools tends to be present in most schools regardless of the communities where they are located. Every classroom has a great deal of cultural diversity present. By our definition, some cultures are readily visible while others may be hidden and not apparent. When we examine achievement, suspension, and expulsion data; assignment to certain categories of special education; or the lack of assignment to gifted, accelerated and advanced placement classes, it becomes clear that those who bring a different culture to the school do not receive equitable treatment and fail to attain equal levels of success.

**Equity:** Access to material and human resources in proportion to needs. Once disparities have been identified, if we proceed with equal allocation of resources, the disparities continue. Equitable allocation responds to identified needs. An example well documented in too many of our schools is veteran teachers working with the most successful students and new, inexperienced, and, too often, ineffective teachers being assigned to work with struggling students. Very often the same is true of principal assignments.

**Ethnicity:** From Lindsey, Nuri Robins, & Terrell (2003) we quote, “. . . ancestral heritage and geography, common history, and, to some degree, physical appearance” (p. 41).

**National Origin:** A designation used in the 1964 Civil Rights Act to specify that people were not to be discriminated against due to their country of birth or prior citizenship.

**Nativism:** The practice of valuing the rights of citizens born in this country over those of immigrants. This practice was promulgated throughout the U.S. during the nineteenth century to marginalize the waves of immigrants from Ireland, Germany, and Eastern Europe.

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**Race:** Also from Lindsey et al. (2003) we quote, “Race is a concept developed by social scientists and misinterpreted by eugenicists and social Darwinists in the [19th] century to characterize people by their physical features and to use those differences to justify the subjugation of people of color and perpetuate the domination of the white race” (p. 41).

**Reflection:** Careful consideration of one’s behaviors, plans, values, or assumptions in an effort to improve interpersonal and professional practice.

**Sexual Orientation:** An enduring emotional, romantic, sexual, or affectional attraction to another person. It is easily distinguished from other components of sexuality including biological sex, gender identity (the psychological sense of being male or female), and the social gender role (adherence to cultural norms for feminine and masculine behavior).

Sexual orientation exists along a continuum that ranges from exclusive homosexuality to exclusive heterosexuality and includes various forms of bisexuality. Bisexual persons can experience sexual, emotional, and affectional attraction to both their own sex and the opposite sex. Persons with a homosexual orientation are sometimes referred to as gay (both men and women) or as lesbian (women only).

Sexual orientation is different from sexual behavior because it refers to feelings and self-concept. Persons may or may not express their sexual orientation in their behaviors.

*Reflection*

We invite you to turn back to the questions and comments that you recorded on the first page of this chapter and take a few minutes in the space provided and record new thoughts, feelings, comments, or questions that are with you now.

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Chapter 2 provides an overview of the tools of cultural proficiency. The tools and the associated reflections provide you with an important lens and key concepts as you continue your leadership journey. Take your time. Enjoy the journey within. You and your communities will benefit from your journey.