Introduction

*The school must allow cultural elements that
are relevant to the children to enter the
classroom . . . thereby enabling the child to move
through relevant experiences from the home
toward the demands of the school as
representative of [a diverse] society . . . We must
first comprehend the fact that children—all
children—come to school motivated to enlarge
their culture. But we must start with their
culture . . . and look first to determine how they
seek to know themselves and others and how their
expertise and experience can be used as the fuel to
fire their interests, knowledge, and skills . . . for
they are rich in assets. As teachers, we enter their
world in order to aid them and to build bridges
between two cultures.*

—Eugene Garcia (1999, p. 82)

What if we were to think of schooling as building bridges
between cultures? In addition, what if we were to envision
education as a means of enlarging one's own culture through mean-
ingful interactions with people from other cultures? What then would
we see in our schools and classrooms? Quite possibly we would see
educators searching for ways to work more successfully with students
who represent the many different cultural, ethnic, linguistic, religious,
and economic subcultures within our diverse society. Cultural and
social diversity is certainly not a new issue facing us as humans. It has
always existed, and we remain challenged by it. However, the bur-
geoning complexity of our times calls upon us as educators to face
this challenge more directly, to value diversity, honor it with integrity,
and to preserve the cultural dignity of our students.

Failing this test places far too many of our students at a serious disadvantage of being excluded from the benefits and opportunities of being well educated. This book addresses the challenges that grow out of the demographic array of students we serve in our schools by offering an approach to education that embraces diversity and responds to it in ways that acknowledge and esteem cultural differences while simultaneously valuing and supporting similarities in a process of additive rather than subtractive acculturation (Ogbu, 1992). The approach we propose is cultural proficiency, which offers both educators and their students knowledge and understanding of how to interact effectively with people in their environments who differ from them. The cultural proficiency model we describe derives from the work of Terry Cross in a monograph he wrote for health care practitioners, *Toward a Culturally Competent System of Care* (Cross, 1989; Cross, Bazron, Dennis, & Isaacs, 1993).

"Cultural proficiency?" "What is that?" "What does it mean?" Some of the educators with whom we work ask these questions when we introduce the term. Quite often, their follow-up questions reveal their real concerns about expected behaviors: "What does it look like in practice?" Commonly, the unspoken concerns are, "Will I be expected to change my behavior?" "Will I have to act differently?" and "What if I feel uncomfortable?" Other educators immediately begin to find ways to integrate new practices into their interactions with students. They want to work more effectively with students who represent the many different cultural groups within our diverse society. Whereas some search for quick fixes that do not exist, others understand the systemic nature of cultural change in an organization and begin the complex work of transforming their schools and districts into inclusive communities whose members view acknowledgment and respect for diverse groups as appropriate and worthy goals for their organizations.

Organizational change is challenging and requires a leader's persistent systemic reinforcement. Indeed, Edgar Schein, in *Organizational Culture and Leadership* (1992), emphatically argues that "the only thing of real importance that leaders do is create and manage culture and . . . the unique talent of leaders is their ability to understand and work with culture" (p. 5).

Educational leaders intent on transforming their schools and districts into pluralistic, inclusive organizations must first be willing and able to look deeply into their own tacit assumptions about the diverse students with whom they work and examine their expectations about those students' achievement potential. Leaders also must identify and pursue effective ways to educate all their students successfully, using strategies that both acknowledge and respond to

the students' varied cultural backgrounds. This book offers ideas, tools, and processes that will serve as a guide for leaders through the complex and challenging cultural transformation of their organizations. Again, Schein's (1992) work illuminates this idea:

> I believe that cultures begin with leaders who impose their own values and assumptions on a group. If that group is successful and the [leader's] assumptions come to be taken for granted, we have then a culture that will define for later generations of members what kinds of leadership are acceptable. The culture now defines leadership. But, as the group encounters adaptive difficulties, as its environment changes to the point where some of its assumptions are no longer valid, leadership comes into play once more. Leadership now is the ability to step outside the culture that created the leader and to start evolutionary changes that are more adaptive. This ability to perceive the limitations of one's own culture and to develop the culture adaptively is the essence and ultimate challenge of leadership. (pp. 1–2)

In this book, our goal is to share with you what we are learning from our work with leaders who recognize the disparities in our schools and who have made a commitment to leverage their leadership to create and manage schools and districts that function at high levels of cultural and social interaction among diverse groups. These leaders acknowledge that diversity is far more than racial or ethnic differences, and their actions reflect a sincere intent to understand and respond to all the subgroups in their schools and districts—particularly groups other than the ones they represent. These leaders also recognize that responses and reactions to cultural diversity have a profound influence on what students learn and how they learn it. Moreover, they have learned that responding to and reacting to *difference* manifest in several ways, which range from cultural destructiveness to cultural proficiency. The range of these responses comprises the points of the cultural proficiency continuum (Lindsey, Nuri Robins, & Terrell, 1999, 2003):

- *Cultural destructiveness:* negating, disparaging, or purging cultures that are different from your own
- *Cultural incapacity:* elevating the superiority of your own cultural values and beliefs and suppressing cultures that are different from your own
- *Cultural blindness:* acting as if differences among cultures do not exist and refusing to recognize any differences

- *Cultural precompetence:* recognizing that lack of knowledge, experience, and understanding of other cultures limits your ability to effectively interact with them
- *Cultural competence:* interacting with other cultural groups in ways that recognize and value their differences, motivate you to assess your own skills, expand your knowledge and resources, and, ultimately, cause you to adapt your relational behavior
- *Cultural proficiency:* honoring the differences among cultures, viewing diversity as a benefit, and interacting knowledgeably and respectfully among a variety of cultural groups

We believe that pluralistic and democratic schooling is possible and that education leaders can create cultures in which cultural proficiency is a dominant value. Schools in which these ideals take root and flourish require leaders to both model and expect behaviors that are consistent with them. Through our work, we have observed that schools begin to change when their leaders recognize the disparities that exist in our schools and then intentionally raise issues of bias, preference, legitimization, privilege, and equity. By choosing to face these issues and grapple with them directly to understand their effects on student learning, these leaders are moving their schools and districts toward culturally proficient practices. However, if they choose to turn away from these issues as if they have no effect on student learning, then, of course, nothing will change. In these circumstances, the achievement gap between students who experience privilege and entitlement and the students who do not will continue to grow and deepen. It is our choice as educators: We can contribute to the gap, or we can challenge and change the contextual conditions that support the inequities that created and perpetuate the academic achievement gap.

Our Invitation to You

As you read this book, we invite you to consider new or alternative perspectives on the many ways we can educate the diverse groups of students in our schools and classrooms. The approach we propose is a focused strategy that significantly and persistently addresses the problems of educational inequity. We firmly believe that education leaders

must mobilize a sustained and coherent strategy that challenges the dominant deficit and at-risk characterizations of some students. An inclusive, pluralistic, and instructionally powerful learning environment offers the real likelihood that all students will be well-educated and successful learners.

Education leaders who pursue the goals of pluralistic and democratic schooling act intentionally with the belief that all children and youth not only have the capacity to learn but also are learning something about themselves and others at every moment. Although these democratic educators would acknowledge that most U.S. schools are very successful in the work of educating the students for whom they were designed, they recognize that this designated group is a narrow, unicultural cluster of students who represent the mainstream European American individualistic values that dominate public education in the United States. Furthermore, these educators understand the imperative that all students must receive the caliber of education they need to fully contribute to and sustain our democratic society. Also, they remain skeptical of the conventional explanations given for the achievement gap—that there is something wrong with the student, their parents, or their culture—and are fully committed to identifying and removing deterrents to academic achievement among undereducated students.

Mainstream assumptions about what is causing the achievement gap usually identify one of two dominant perspectives. One well-documented perspective is that some children—generally poor children of color and children who have language "liabilities"—are not succeeding in our schools. The second perspective—equally well documented—is that systems of oppression, such as racism and exclusion, are responsible for the undereducation, if not the miseducation, of many students—again, generally poor children of color and children who have language limitations (Delpit, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Nieto, 2000). We certainly agree with these two perspectives and discuss them in this book because they help shape an understanding of culturally proficient practices. However, we also include a third perspective that describes how children and youth for whom our schools were designed and for whom they function well—generally students from mainstream ethnic, social, and economic groups—also experience deficits. Their worldview of privilege and entitlement excludes and isolates them from learning how to interact effectively in a multicultural society in which their values are but one facet. We examine these three perspectives and describe how they

intersect in U.S. educational practices and institutions. An important purpose of our work is to describe how systems of oppression, such as racism and exclusion, obstruct the educational progress of some students while they simultaneously benefit and propel the progress of other students. Traditional views of educational racism and exclusion often focus on their obstructive effects (Kovel, 1984; Terry, 1970). Our book offers leadership strategies that are sensitive to how and why some children and youth fail in our schools and why—and at what cost—others succeed. We invite you on this journey to find the will and means for our schools to serve the educational needs of all students.

Our Intent

Our intent is to weave a tapestry of strategies with an understanding of organizations as dynamic and culturally adaptive systems that can significantly support transformative learning—what educational journalist Gene Maeroff (1999) describes as "altered destinies." A central tenet of this book is that effective leaders act with intentions informed through a personal transformation of taking responsibility to lead in a way that addresses the educational needs of all students (Delpit, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Reeves, 2000).

Part I is composed of Chapter 1, which introduces the case story and the importance of culturally proficient leadership. Chapter 1 begins with a vital question: Why is culturally proficient leadership important? This chapter introduces a case story that we intertwine throughout the rest of the book as a way to illustrate the complexity of cultural leadership and organizational change. The case returns to the fictional town of Maple View, which was first presented in *Culturally Proficient Instruction: A Guide for People Who Teach* (Nuri Robins, Lindsey, Lindsey, & Terrell, 2002). The Maple View story involves you in the lives of people who confront the lack of inclusive equity throughout their community and schools. Through this case, we intend to illustrate the ways in which educators might experience and practice the concepts we present in this book. The Maple View story presents accounts of individuals and groups who face obstacles, such as their own cultural insensitivity and preferences, that lead to selectively biased instructional relationships, inconsistent resource allocation, uneven student accomplishment, and unequal power relationships in classrooms, schools, and the district. The story and the characters are composites of real people in real schools

with whom we have worked. The case also demonstrates the ways in which the individuals and groups in Maple View overcome these deterrents through their willingness to learn and work together to become culturally proficient. Our hope is that these stories inspire your own commitment and action.

Part II consists of Chapters 2 through 5. In these chapters, we describe the features of culturally proficient educational practice and delineate the fundamental characteristics of such practice. In addition, these chapters expand the concept of cultural proficiency through the introduction of definitions, illustrations, group process exercises, and leadership tools. The activities and tools in these chapters invite you to participate in a process of reflection, and maybe transformation, of your personal leadership. In Chapters 2 through 4, you will learn the basic tools of cultural proficiency—the guiding principles, continuum, and the five essential elements. You will learn how to use these tools through vignettes reflective of real conversations other educators are having about teaching, learning, and leading. Chapter 5 leads you through an examination of barriers to personal change and organizational change. Barriers are systemic practices and policies that inhibit the learning of some children. It is our responsibility as educational leaders to adapt our practices to the needs of our students. This chapter will show you when and how people deal with their anger and guilt when confronting personal transformation.

In Part III, Chapters 6 and 7, we provide techniques leaders use to inspire organizational learning and change as strategies for achieving cultural proficiency in their schools and districts. The intent of these chapters is to focus on developing skillful leadership practices. In these chapters, we examine the importance of data-driven problem solving and propose that when leaders have the facility to use effective tools and problem-solving skills, they have the potential to bring their intentions into being. Finally, we posit that culturally proficient leaders set the tone and provide the example for those they lead. Indeed, they must be role models for the change they envision. The challenge we pose for leaders is to stay focused on the future they imagine and let that be the context for all their actions. Most important, education leaders must learn how to exemplify and generate new ways of believing and behaving that reflect pluralistic and democratic values.

The References and Bibliography provide you with the works that informed our writing in this book and are resources for you to consider when adding to your professional libraries. We wish you good fortune as you continue to find ways to meet the needs of our children and youth.