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... 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. 8)

GETTING CENTERED

We assume that in picking up and beginning to read this book, you are seeking to improve your school in ways that serve all students equitably. With that assumption in mind, we suggest you begin this journey of experiencing culturally proficient schools by considering several questions:

• If schooling were to build bridges between and among the cultures that currently exist in your school, what might that look like?
• If schooling were a means for enlarging one’s own culture through meaningful interactions with people from other cultures, what might that look like?
• From your experience, what are some of the assets that children and youth bring to schools that can serve as bridges to their increased academic success?

Use the space that follows to record your thinking and questions that might be occurring to you.
Quite possibly your thoughts and questions involved educators searching for ways to work more successfully with students who represent the varied cultural, ethnic, linguistic, religious, sexual orientation, gender diverse, and socioeconomic cultures within our diverse society. Cultural and social diversity is certainly not a new issue for us as humans. Diversity has always existed and, yet, we remain challenged by it. The burgeoning complexity of our times provides opportunities for us as educators to embrace ways that value the cultures of our students as assets on which to build their educational experiences.

Failure to embrace students’ cultures as assets gives rise to deficit-based thinking and places far too many students in danger of being excluded from the benefits and opportunities of being well educated. This book addresses the challenges that grow out of the demographic and cultural 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 are culturally different 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

In the third edition of our initial book, in what has become a book series, Cultural Proficiency is described to be “a model for shifting the culture of the school or district; it is a model for individual transformation and organizational change. Cultural Proficiency is a mindset, a worldview, a way of being assumed by a person or an organization for effectively describing, responding to, and planning for issues that arise in diverse environments. For some people, Cultural Proficiency is a paradigm shift from viewing cultural difference as problematic to learning how to interact effectively with other cultures” (Lindsey, Nuri Robins, & Terrell, 2009, p. 4).

Culturally proficient leaders strive to demonstrate behaviors aligned with their espoused values that lead to effective communication with their
colleagues, students, parents and community members. At the school and district levels, culturally proficient leaders promote practices aligned with policies that bring about effective interactions among educators, students, parents, and community members. When leaders and their organizations are intentionally on a journey to Cultural Proficiency, conflict and change are embraced as natural consequences of people coming together and are not to be feared. Change and reform are valued allies in providing equitable educational opportunities for all children, youth, and adult learners served by the school.

**CULTURAL PROFICIENCY MANAGES CHANGE**

In our work with the Tools of Cultural Proficiency, several questions arise quite appropriately—“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, colleagues, parents, and members of the community. They want to work more effectively with students who represent the many cultural groups within our diverse society. While educators 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. Members view acknowledgment and respect for diverse groups as appropriate and worthy goals for their organizations and work toward improved education for all students.

Make no mistake about it, 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 to serve as a guide for leaders through the complex and challenging cultural transformation of their organizations. Again, Schein’s (1992) seminal 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 new edition of our book, our goal is to share with you what we are learning from our work with leaders who recognize the access and academic achievement 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 cultural and demographic groups in their schools and districts—particularly groups other than the ones they represent. These leaders also recognize that their and their colleagues’ responses and reactions to cultural diversity have a profound influence on what students learn and how they learn it. Culturally proficient educational leaders 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, 2009):

- **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
Chapter 1: Culture Frames Achievement Gaps

- **Cultural precompetence**: recognizing that lack of knowledge, experience, and understanding of other cultures limits your ability to effectively interact with them and beginning to engage in a willingness to learn
- **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**: committing to life-long learning for self and your school, committing to actions that are in the best interest of all students, and advocating for the underserved

Educational leaders can create school cultures in which Cultural Proficiency is a dominant value. Pluralistic and democratic schooling must be our goal. 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 their schools and then intentionally raise issues of bias, marginalization, preference, legitimation, 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 themselves as well as their schools and districts toward culturally proficient practices. In contrast, for leaders who 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 have been historically well served and the students who have not been will continue to grow and deepen. As educators, we can choose to contribute to access and achievement gaps, or we can choose to change the contextual conditions that support the inequities that created and perpetuate the academic achievement gap.

**OUR INVITATION TO YOU: FROM NCLB TO COMMON CORE**

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.
The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 ushered in the 21st century with new hope that all demographic student groups would be served in ways that would close access, achievement, and education gaps. Even the 2014 deadline seemed hopeful given the funding sources behind the mandate. Intervention programs sprung up almost overnight it seemed in response to the mandate’s “scientific-research” requirements for education interventions in support of reading and math achievement. Districts across the nation began to see important achievement gains by student groups who had not experienced success prior to the gap that had been exposed by NCLB. Following the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), popularly known as NCLB, the second round of ESEA came on the horizon with Barack Obama’s presidency in 2009. The vision of all students reaching high levels of achievement once again came into question with the assessment deadline of 2014 from NCLB seemingly unattainable. The U.S. Department of Education then focused federal education resources toward a national curriculum called the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) that would be realized through Race to the Top (RttT), the U.S. Department of Education’s version of NCLB revised.

As states applied for RttT funding, their educational leaders also moved forward in writing and approving CCSS, a requirement for RttT funding. The CCSS were unveiled in 2010 and as of this writing have been adopted by all but five states. The design and implementation plans moved forward quickly with common assessments, common curriculum, and common texts and resource materials. As state departments of education and local school districts and schools position themselves to implement the CCSS by 2014, numerous questions face educators who use equity-based models, such as Cultural Proficiency, as a lens to examine their work:

- In what ways will we use the “education gap” data that we collected and analyzed from NCLB?
- In what ways will we incorporate our “lessons learned” from our NCLB conversations about closing our education gaps?
- Why will CCSS serve us in ways NCLB did not?
- Why will CCSS provide opportunities to address issues of equity and inequity?
- Is CCSS the “what,” “how,” or “why” of educating all learners?
- In what ways might CCSS provide access to college and careers to all learners in ways that have not happened before?
- What’s different about the educators with the implementation of CCSS that will make this “reform” a transformative change in schools and school districts?
Answers to the inescapable “why” question are wrapped around the concept of equity. Educational leaders who pursue the goals of pluralistic and democratic schooling act intentionally by responding to the “why” question with the belief that all children and youth not only have the capacity and right to learn, but also they are learning about themselves and others at every moment.

Democratic educators recognize that most U.S. schools are very successful educating the students for whom our schools were designed, and they recognize that this is a narrow cluster of students who represent mainstream European American individualistic values that predominate U.S. public schools. As you read the Guiding Principles of Cultural Proficiency in Chapter 4, you will note they are equity-focused and inclusive of all students in our schools. Democratic 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.

Perspectives as to causes of the achievement gaps are many, but three predominate and overlap in our schools:

- Significant segments of society and educators hold deficit-based perspectives that children and youth from low socioeconomic or conditions of poverty, children and youth of color, and children and youth who are English learning students are not succeeding in our schools because of cultural deficiencies.

- Another perspective held by some members of society and educators is that systemic oppression, such as racism and exclusion, is responsible for the undereducation, if not the miseducation, of children and youth from low socioeconomic and impoverished conditions, children and youth of color, and English learning children and youth. This perspective describes how systemic oppression, as forms of exclusion and marginalization, obstruct the educational progress of some students while simultaneously benefitting and propelling the progress of other students.

- A third perspective held by some members of society and educators describes children and youth for whom our schools were designed and for whom they function well as also experiencing deficits. However, their deficits are rarely discussed. Students from mainstream ethnic, social, and economic groups often develop a worldview of privilege and entitlement that isolates them from learning how to interact effectively in a multicultural
society (Delpit, 1995; Kovel, 1984; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Lindsey & Daly, 2012; Nieto, 2000, Quezada, Lindsey, & Lindsey, 2013; Terry, 1970).

These perspectives recur throughout this book and are used to help educators develop an understanding of how they and their schools can progress from recognizing “deficit-based” perspectives that predominate their schools, to recognizing systemic oppression, and to developing culturally proficient leadership behaviors and organizational practices. This book offers leadership strategies to explore the how and why some children and youth fail in our schools and why 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.

THE “WHY” OF THIS BOOK

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, Shields, 2010).

Chapter 2 presents the composite case story of Maple View. With this chapter, you will be introduced to a school district and a set of people, many of whom may appear quite familiar to you. The Maple View case story is important in that it gives “voice” to the many equity issues we face in schools today. Please acquaint yourself with the story and the persons who comprise the story; doing so will make your learning in Parts II and III ever more active and enable you to apply associated learning to your professional practice and to that of your school or district.