1 Common Core and Cultural Proficiency

A Commitment Toward Equity

Equity is the fundamental value, visible through public commitments and specific practices. Supporting values—continuous learning for all, collaboration, and collective responsibility for everyone learning—further enliven equity at each school. These values together are non-negotiable drivers of improvement.

—Gleason & Gerzon, 2013, p. 120

GETTING CENTERED

The epigraph is from Gleason and Gerzon's research study of four Title I case schools to identify common themes for all students achieving at high performance levels. The researchers found that educators at these four schools *lived* their values that supported equitable learning for their students. Their values were not only their *espoused* values but also their ways of being, ways of teaching, and ways of learning. Take a moment and reread Gleason and Gerzon's quote. Now, think about the espoused values at your school, usually found in your school's vision and mission statement or list of core values. In what ways do these values become *lived* values and actions? What evidence and artifacts would you use to demonstrate to visitors your lived values? In what ways do the current

espoused values prepare you and your colleagues for implementing and sustaining the Common Core State Standards (CCSS)? What might be missing from your school's stated values? Please use the space below to record your feelings, your questions, and your thinking as you consider these questions.

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WHY THIS BOOK?

We assume that you selected this book because of your commitment to equitable outcomes for all students. Like us, you are keenly aware that though the United States has made progress in narrowing access and achievement gaps in recent years, you might wonder how the CCSS will influence your ability to provide for students' needs. You are also aware that though the CCSS implies equity through use of phrases such as "all students," our reality is that equity can never be assumed—it must be explicitly expressed. This book responds to the urgency to fulfill the promise of the CCSS for all students, with a decided emphasis on "all." Given the richness and complexity of the diversity in today's schools, educators must be well prepared to ensure the CCSS involves a shift in teaching and learning that better prepares all students to be ready for college and the workplace when they graduate from high school.

This book is not about a blame game. This book is about understanding one's own mindsets and those of our colleagues to help us create even better educational experiences for our students. The journey to understanding equity and inequity begins with the individual. The journey begins with you and with me and with us. This chapter begins a carefully crafted journey in developing Culturally Proficient Professional Learning. This chapter guides you in reflecting on the manner in which your assumptions and mindsets help determine your values and beliefs for being successful in working with diverse communities. Enjoy the journey as it informs and empowers your continued success as an educator.

MINDSETS ARE WHO WE ARE

Cultural Proficiency is a mindset we use to view and experience the world around us. If our environment constitutes only people who are culturally like us, we may develop a mindset that literally cannot witness the experiences of others, no matter whether other cultural groups are having positive or negative experiences. The danger of limited exposure to others is that we may develop assumptions and beliefs informed by our lack of experiences that lead to stereotyping people who are different from us. Cultural Proficiency is about opening ourselves and our school or district to acknowledge the experiences of those not being successful in our schools. We are able to recognize the barriers our students face and, for us as educators, to be able to use our students' cultures as assets on which to build educational programs.

In our work over the past 20 years, we have used many analogies to communicate that Cultural Proficiency is a process, not a thing or an event. Some of the more prevalent analogies are:

- Cultural Proficiency as a mindset,
- Cultural Proficiency as a worldview,
- Cultural Proficiency as perspective,
- Cultural Proficiency as a mental model,
- Cultural Proficiency as a journey, and
- Cultural Proficiency as a lens through which to view and experience the world.

Pick the analogy that works for you. This book is about and for you. We have designed the book for use in your personal and professional development and for teams of educators devoted to educating students from all cultural groups in our communities and schools.

The journey of Cultural Proficiency involves recognizing the beliefs that create mindsets. Beliefs that relate to race, ethnicity, gender, social class, religion, ableness, or sexual orientation block effectiveness in cross-cultural communications and problem solving. It usually takes an awakening experience to challenge uninformed, negative cultural beliefs and their underlying assumptions. The personal story that follows is intended as an illustration provided by a colleague and his path to self-discovery.

Two of our authors have worked with the Oxnard California Police Department over the past several years. We supported the members of the department learning how to use the Tools of Cultural Proficiency and to adapt the tools to their law enforcement practice. That setting provides an apt description of the power of mindset. After several sessions, Eric

Sonstegard, Special Operations Division Commander, shared his experience of a changed mindset as he became increasingly aware of diversities and inequities that exist in society:

> *I wanted to share something with both of you that I'm not sure I can articulate accurately in an e-mail but I'll try my best. J.*
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> *I know both of you are partially aware of my background and the fact that I grew up in a predominately white, upper-class neighborhood and attended a Lutheran University. Looking back, before I met both of you, I lived my life with what I characterize as "blinders" on. I was relatively successful in everything I did and had absolutely no idea about the advantages I had in life. Even as I progressed through my law enforcement career, I was woefully unaware of my place in society and the different cultures that surrounded me each day. It is very easy to do this when you work with police officers like yourself all day and then go home to a neighborhood that is very homogenous in its demographics. Since I met both of you and started on this journey with our cultural proficiency curriculum, I feel like some type of "code" was unlocked inside of me and I view everything around me different. By everything. . . , I mean everything. I can't read a newspaper article, watch the evening news, listen to the radio, or talk with friends without relating it to issues we've emphasized over the past few years. The analogy I like to make is if you've ever seen the movie* The Matrix. *They go through the movie viewing everything around them as it is, but at the end of the movie, Keanu Reeves's character is able to see all of the inner-workings behind everything around him. I feel like I can finally see through the superficiality of many things around me.*
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> *I know that's a lot to digest, but there are very few people that understand or I can talk about it with. I guess I just want to thank you for being who you guys are and I'm blessed, both personally and for the department, that I met you. My one disappointment is that it took me 39 years to finally figure some of these things out. JJ.*

"Blinders" and "code" are weighty concepts. However, at this point you might ask, quite appropriately, "Though this is interesting, what does it have to do with educational reform?" Our response is, there are several concepts in this book to challenge or inform your beliefs and mindset about educational reform as well to inform you about marginalized groups' consistent struggles for equitable access and outcomes throughout our history. Officer Sonstegard gave us permission to share his mindset breakthrough in the expectation that reading of the personal experience of someone outside of education would serve as a useful illustration uncluttered by our education experiences.

REFLECTION

Take a few moments and think about the passages above. What comes to mind for you? What are your reactions? What new questions are surfacing about who you are? What new questions are surfacing about your school or district? Please use the spaces below to record your thinking.

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This chapter describes the shift that must occur in teaching and learning by confronting beliefs, values, and deeply held assumptions about teaching and learning that have stymied educators' efforts to narrow and close access and achievement gaps. Each subsequent chapter provides a carefully crafted sequence of information and activities designed to guide you in becoming the educator you want to be and your school in becomimg a school that serves all students in an equitable manner.

The CCSS initiative is the current attempt to reform the American educational system. For the past 50 years, US public education has proposed to operate with a philosophy that it will serve as the foundation for providing the citizenry with tools that can help to sustain a democracy. At least three prominent and competing perspectives are present regarding CCSS:

- Some proponents of education reform hold that the promises of school reforms to date have been unrealized and this newest iteration of reform is embraced as the panacea to produce positive learning outcomes that lead to students' college and career readiness.
- Others view CCSS as just another step along a path to nowhere for many historically underserved students.
- Still a third group is wary of CCSS as an attempt to undermine local control and to nationalize curriculum.

In this book, we don't attempt to confront those different perspectives, only to acknowledge their existence and to make a case that whatever drives change initiatives must be tailored to the needs of all students. Therefore, we use CCSS as the frame for meeting the needs of all students and for writing this book. The book is designed in ways that can be applied to the various state-level modifications of CCSS.

The purpose of this book is to guide Culturally Proficient Leaders, including teachers, counselors, and administrators, as you:

- Bring an equity focus to the CCSS without losing the gains/progress from using No Child Left Behind's approach to disaggregating data for closing/narrowing access and achievement gaps;
- Embed the lens of Cultural Proficiency in the phrase "teach and lead differently" inherent in the CCSS;
- Ensure rigor, meaningful curricula and assessment, and higher order thinking for all students;
- Demonstrate how Cultural Proficiency is the lens for school leaders to create conditions that make the Common Core accessible for all students;
- Ensure the Common Core be possible and achievable for historically underserved students; and
- Deepen and extend educators' learning and experiences as they continue to become true professional learning communities.

THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE UGLY OF THE CCSS

In this book, we explore the potential good, bad, and ugly of the CCSS approach. Questions that guide us are: Will the CCSS produce positive academic outcomes for students? More importantly, will the CCSS produce positive outcomes for *all* students in a way that is different from past and current practices that continue to result in major gaps and disparities between and among different demographic groups of students? What is there in this prescribed set of standards and accountability markers that projects success? In what ways might the Common Core offer educators an opportunity to push the reset button and develop unique ways of delivering education and producing different outcomes?

These and other questions are yet unanswered and are useful to guide our work. To those questions we propose a new set of questions relevant to implementation of the CCSS and the education of all of our students:

- In what ways might we maintain a focus for the disproportionate assignment of African American, Latino, and Aboriginal First Nations students to classes for students with exceptionalities?
- In what ways do we maintain a focus for the disproportionally higher rates of suspensions, expulsions, and other sources of discipline that relegate inordinate numbers of African American, Latino, and Aboriginal First Nations students to be excluded from learning opportunities?

These are the kinds of questions that the lens of Cultural Proficiency helps us address in this book.

COMMON CORE SUPPORTS EDUCATORS AND STUDENTS TO BE CO-LEARNERS

Elementary schools have had a common core from their earliest beginnings. A set of common, *agreed-upon* standards that led to an *agreed-upon* curriculum was necessary to teach reading fundamentals to all students. Yet we know that the major failure or the defining factor in the outcome gaps has been the inability to provide all students with equitable resources to reach this reading baseline on which other learning is built.

School curricula are seemingly simple, yet as educators we know of their levels of complexity. Curriculum theorists (Banks, 2006; Delpit, 1995; Meier, 2002) have long referenced formal curriculum as those things taught intentionally in classrooms. These theorists also recognize that curriculum emanates from two seemingly unrelated sources. On the one hand, content for the formal curriculum is usually dictated by a combination of input from local, district, and state educational sources. To those sources, CCSS now provides a nationally approved set of standards. In addition to these formal sources, a powerful, real-life curriculum is lived out daily in classrooms, homes and in the communities of students that plays a major role in academic outcomes (Smith, 1996/2000). These realities, in fact, tend not to be very common across students' backgrounds and cultures, nor are they common across the backgrounds and cultures of the various teachers who will be the learning facilitators for these students.

In actuality, the cultures of those of us who are educators are often very different from the students in our classes. The choice is ours. We can let these cultural differences be an insurmountable problem. Or the culturally diverse classrooms can serve as rich laboratories that contribute to the growth and development of educators and students alike. The latter choice resonates in this book.

FROM REFORMING TO TRANSFORMING

Many previous educational reforms seemed to have had great potential for providing success for all; however, they often failed in rapid implementation processes that ignored or were oblivious to the cultures of the students. This invisibility of the power of culture has been exacerbated over the past 15 years by myriad forces—budget cutbacks and a lack of

resources to support appropriate class size; inadequate instructional materials; demands from federal and state mandates for required, high-stakes standardized assessments; closing underserved schools; opening competing private/charter schools; rewards and sanctions related to testing; limiting educators' professional learning resources to mandated programs; and replacing principals and teachers based on schoolwide test scores. Often, some of the forces were presented as silver-bullet education reforms. The failure of many of these reforms is situated in what Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) refer to as the *five fallacies of misdirected education change:*

Excessive speed,

Standardization,

Substitution of bad people with good ones,

Overreliance on a narrow range of performance metrics, and

Win-lose inter-school competition. (p. 41)

So, rather than re-forming or trying to reshape schools, today's culturally proficient leaders are moving toward transformative actions. Shields (2010) describes three types of leadership, as a progression of ever-deepening change processes:

- Transactional leadership involves a reciprocal interaction in which the intention is for agreement and both parties benefit from the decision. For example, decisions in which faculty and principal agree to twice-monthly meetings that focus on improving literacy skills for all students are transactional leadership behaviors.
- Transformational leadership focuses on improving organizational effectiveness. Continuing with the example of improving student literacy, faculty agrees with principals to engage in professional development for instructional improvement that focuses on literacy literature and skill development.
- Transformative leadership recognizes that gaps in student literacy are found in inequities that are generational and correlated with students' demographic groupings. Continuing with the literacy examples, faculty and principals collaboratively challenge practices that marginalize students and press for equitable academic access and outcomes.

As you proceed through the book, you will see evidence of Hargreaves and Fullan's cautions as well as Shields' typology of leadership. Cultural proficiency is not a competitive quick fix but rather

an intentional examination of self and our organizations in order to develop core values that honor and educate all students. Culturally proficient leadership, likewise, integrates Shields' descriptions of leadership into a seamless approach that recognizes day-to-day realities of school management alongside future-focused, systemic, transformative change in how students are served.

ASSUMPTIONS OF THIS BOOK

The coauthors held the following assumptions as we prepared this book:

- The CCSS were adopted by states as a way to improve education opportunities for all learners.
- The CCSS were prepared through a collaborative effort to ensure students across the United States would have access to an agreed-upon "core" of standards to help prepare them to enter college and the workplace upon graduating from high school.
- Students learn best when they are in schools and classrooms of teachers and administrators who demonstrate a value for their cultures and their families.
- Educators are the most important resource for student achievement during the school day.
- Educators working effectively with students' parents and guardians are important resources for supporting student achievement beyond the school day.
- Educator growth and development is an intentional, continuous process supported by systemwide, high-quality, professional learning and development.
- Professional learning viewed through the lens of Cultural Proficiency ensures equitable approaches to closing the student access and achievement gaps.

DEFINITION OF TERMS

The following terms are defined as they are used to support you as you read this book:

Culturally Proficient learning and leading is distinguished from other diversity and equity approaches in that it is anchored in the belief that a person must clearly understand one's own assumptions, beliefs, and

values about people and cultures different from one's self to be effective in cross-cultural settings.

Access is the opportunity for preK–12 students to fully participate in high-level curricular and instruction programs of the school.

Common Core (Standards) is the most recent effort of educators and policymakers to identify and organize what our American students should know and be able to do by Grade 12 to graduate immediately ready for success in college and careers.

CCSS is the acronym for Common Core State Standards, often shortened to Common Core.

Equity is fairness and justice in assessing and providing for student academic and social needs.

College and Career Readiness is ensuring that students graduate high school ready to enter college and pursue a career.

Communities of Practice (Professional Learning Communities, Learning Communities) are formal and nonformal settings for educators to reflect on practice and to engage in professional learning.

Student Success/Achievement is meeting annual performance measures that ensure successful high school graduation.

THEORY OF ACTION FOR THIS BOOK

As authors, we offer teachers and school leaders a theory of action that will afford you an opportunity to enrich and enhance yourselves as implementers and facilitators of the Common Core, thus increasing success possibilities for all students. We offer the Tools for Culturally Proficient practices as an equity lens to examine the implementation process for the CCSS in your districts and schools.

Culturally Proficient educators use mindfulness, intentionality, reflection, and dialogue as baseline practices for connecting educators' beliefs, values, and culture with the beliefs, values, and culture of the students and the communities in which they serve. We invite you to join us on this journey of applying theory into the daily practice of engaging with your school community. This theory of action allows school leaders to add the fourth "R" to reading, 'riting, and 'rithmetic to include *relationships.*

This book presents the Four Tools of Cultural Proficiency as the foundation for addressing the continuing need to narrow and close access, achievement, and educational gaps in the United States and Canada. Although the

conversation about a universal curriculum has been around for almost 30 years, only recently has the United States focused on a set of common standards from which to develop curriculum and assessments for K–12 education. Our question is, *In what ways do the CCSS help or challenge us in addressing equity and diversity?* Although the CCSS do not necessarily confront inequity directly, the outcomes of college and career readiness for all students are certainly implied. As we implement practices and learning required to meet the expectations inherent in the CCSS, we have opportunities to better address equity issues through culturally proficient actions and policies. Devising culturally proficient actions entails confronting barriers to reform initiatives such as the CCSS that exist within ourselves and our schools and districts as we continue to improve our craft and profession.

This book is composed of reflective and professional learning dialogic activities to guide you and your colleagues to do the one thing you want to do most, which is to support each and every student to be successful. The Tools of Cultural Proficiency guide you to understand your own assumptions about the students you serve, to know your values relative to equity issues, to create change within your practice, and to create teaching and learning environments that are relevant and rigorous for all learners. The book contains an *Implementation Rubric* to help leaders develop culturally proficient responses to the Common Core. Chapters 6 through 10 employ a blend of case stories and personal disclosure experiences to illustrate and demonstrate reflection and dialogue. The five chapters are shaped around the 5 Essential Elements as the Action Plan for Culturally Proficient Professional Learning unfolds for Lupe, the principal of a local middle school who faces the challenges and success of implementing the CCSS.

GOING DEEPER

Before you read any further, what are your thoughts about this opening chapter? In what ways do you expect this book to meet your learning needs? In what ways has this first chapter supported your knowledge and needs about teaching, learning, and leading the CCSS? What new questions do you now have? Please use the space below to record your thinking.

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DIALOGIC ACTIVITY

With a group of your colleagues, engage in a dialogue to reach shared understanding of *a school culture in support of all learners performing at levels higher than ever before*. Continue the dialogue throughout small learning communities in your school district. Once shared understanding has been reached, what might be some resources, strategies, and structures that could be developed and activated to support all learners, with emphasis on achieving college *and* career readiness?

Chapter 2 begins our exploration of why an equity-based approach to the Common Core is needed. School reform is not new and, in fact, is part of a decades-long commitment to continuous improvement. However, only in the last few years have reform efforts begun to address persistent, historical inequities that are now well documented as access and achievement gaps. The information is this chapter will provide a rich context as you proceed to ensure that all of our students have access to high-quality education outcomes.