1 What Are Equity and Access Gaps? Why Do They Persist?

When school goals are developed from mission statements without shared values and clear vision, then goals and action plans will be nebulous and the mission will, again, not address the needs of all students in the school.

Frattura & Capper (2007, p. 41)

GETTING CENTERED

As an introductory activity for reading this book, examine your school and district's mission and vision statements. In what ways are the statements aligned with your values, beliefs, and assumptions? In what ways are the statements aligned with your day to day actions as a member of the school/district community? In what ways are the values, beliefs, assumptions, and actions of your colleagues aligned with these vision and mission statements? What might be some responses to the Frattura and Capper quote when you share it with your colleagues?

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WHEN MANDATES MEET MORALITY

This book focuses on what it takes for all educators to believe they can educate all learners in ways that embrace students' cultures as assets and students' learning differences as just that—differences rather than deficits. Believing we can educate all learners is a powerful belief statement that drives action in classrooms and schools. Not too many years ago, educators would proclaim, _I believe all students can learn!_ The statement became part of nearly every vision and mission statement, slogans in classrooms, posted on banners throughout school buildings, and chanted as mantras across classrooms far and near. Of course, the proclamation was intended as a powerful belief statement to guide teachers' actions in the classroom. One problem was the widely accepted statement developed silent exceptions that were attached to the end. _All students can learn . . . except the students with special needs; All students can learn . . . except those kids who live in the trailer park . . . except those kids who don't speak English . . . except those kids who have an aide with them all the time._ The responsibility for learning seemed to be on the students rather the educators.

This book takes the statement, "_We believe all educators can educate all learners!_" and places the responsibility with all educators, school and district administrators, support personnel including paraprofessionals, custodians, front office staff members, and school board members. Truly, we are all in this business of educating learners together. And along with us are our partners: parents, community members, health and human services, and other support agencies. As partners, who hold a belief system that is inclusive of educating all learners and educators who possess a skill set that is grounded in culturally relevant and equitable instructional practices, we can create a culturally proficient inclusive educational environment.

We present the four Tools of Cultural Proficiency and the Inclusive Schooling practices and philosophies as a framework for action to facilitate you and other educators to be able to provide equitable educational opportunities to meet the needs of _all_ learners, especially learners who may benefit from special education services. We provide case stories, tables, figures, and reflective and dialogic activities to engage you in applying the four Tools and Inclusive Schooling practices to your current

context. This book is written to guide you on your cultural proficiency journey in support of inclusive classrooms and schools.

Certainly, we recognize that an abundance of laws already exist to support our work with children and youth with identified disabilities and other learning challenges. In 1975, Congress passed the Education for All Handicapped Children's Act (Public Law 94-142), which guarantees that all students with disabilities receive a free and appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment. Since then, the law's name has changed, most recently, in 2004, to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA). Regardless of name changes, the law has provided the foundation for Inclusive Education and codified advancements in policy and practices that forward Inclusive Education. Bolstering IDEIA is the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), the 2015 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. ESSA maintains the act's legacy as a civil rights law in at least three ways. First, it ensures that states and districts hold schools accountable for the progress of every student subgroup (e.g., students with disabilities). Second, it dedicates resources and supports so that students with disabilities, English learners, and vulnerable student subgroups (e.g., children of low-income, homeless, or migrant worker families) have equitable access to rigorous curriculum and quality educators. Third, it requires districts to use evidence-based, whole-school interventions in its lowest-performing schools and in schools where subgroups (e.g., students with IEPs, English learners) persistently underperform. In short, ESSA articulates an expectation that schools foster and be held accountable for high educational standards, equality of opportunity to learn, and excellence in student performance for every child.

Even with these mandates in place, students with special educational needs continue to lag behind their counterparts in achievement, according to performance data in today's data-rich environments. As a matter of fact, we emphasize these education gaps persist today, despite an abundance of federal laws and compliance checks. Many of today's schools now describe these achievement gaps as issues of disproportionality (Linn & Hemmer, 2011). Disproportionality may be defined as the "over- or under-representation of a given population group, often defined by racial and ethnic backgrounds, but also defined by socioeconomic status, national origin, English proficiency, gender, and sexual orientation, in a specific population category" (Elementary and Middle School Technical Assistance Center, n.d., para.1). Disproportionality in special education involves the inappropriate over-identification, misidentification, and/or misclassification of certain groups of students as special education eligibility. Sullivan (2011) describes the over-representative identification, and placement of culturally and linguistically diverse students and students of color in special education as a long-standing

phenomenon, which "strongly indicates systemic problems in inequity, prejudice, and marginalization within the education system" (p. 318).

General educators and members of the special education community have an ongoing need to learn about and have tools to recognize institutional Barriers, individual beliefs, and deeply held societal or personal assumptions that foster and perpetuate these gaps. We address the need to narrow and close these gaps through the content of this book. Our goal through intentional actions is to support and teach students who require and need differentiated learning and behavior supports to easily access and progress in the general education curriculum to fully participate in their educational lives. We focus the content of this book on what to do when *mandates meet morality*.

REFLECTION

To what extent are you aware of the laws that pertain to students with special educational needs? In what ways do these opening comments resonate with you and your context? What are the moral issues facing educators in preK–12 schools and classrooms today regarding equity and access? What gaps and disproportionality exist in your school/district? What's being done to address these issues?

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WHY WE WROTE THIS BOOK

We drew from our personal and professional experiences to write this book. We are parents, grandparents, and active community members. We are teachers, administrators, education consultants, and higher education faculty. We work directly in the field with soon-to-be teachers and administrators, psychologists and counselors, and community organizers. We wanted to use our collective experiences, combined knowledge, collaborative skills, and multiple perspectives to address the often stated and never challenged vision statement: *We believe that all students can learn*. While we do have a strong belief that students can and will learn, the evidence is clear that many educators, in fact, must not believe all students can learn because the education gap still persists. As stated by co-authors Lindsey, Kearney, Estrada, Terrell, and Lindsey (2015), "You are also aware that though the Common Core State

Standards implies through use of phrases such as 'all students,' our reality is that equity can never be assumed—it must be explicitly expressed" (p. 11).

This book is NOT written for special educators, specifically. The book is written for *all* who interact with and support students who have a documented learning need, have educational gaps, and/or who receive special education services. When we say *all*, we refer to anyone in the community where children and youth learn, work, and play. We have written this book to demonstrate a shift in thinking from putting the full responsibility for student's learning on "they, the students" to our responsibility "we, the educators." Certainly, we are advocates for students being engaged in their own learning with parents as partners in the student's educational life. We support the belief that students must take responsibility for their own learning and progress. And more than that, we believe and value the role of educators have in creating conditions for students and parents to be able to their best work and their best thinking. That is why we wrote this book. We are supporting you to use the lens of Cultural Proficiency to create classrooms and schools that are inclusive of all learners.

This book went to press shortly after the inauguration of the 45th president of the United States and following a contentious presidential election season, unlike any the co-authors have experienced over our many years. The issues that many voters faced were grounded in personal values, beliefs, and assumptions about the candidates and the two-party system of our democracy. Social media, false news sites, and hostile candidates' attack ads forced our educators, now more than ever before, to create safe spaces and places for students to think, talk, and learn with each other. We cannot forecast what the next years will bring, but we can provide an inclusive educational environment where students and their families are valued, respected, and appreciated as learners. Our democracy is designed for us to express our rights and freedoms. Our classrooms are the perfect places for our students to express and experience that democracy in action. Let's work together to provide an educational environment where *ALL* truly means *ALL*, irrespective of who our elected officials are. Hopefully, schools and programs will benefit from state and federal programs/funds to support all students. However, we as educators cannot wait on those resources. We must act together and act now!

WHAT IS CULTURALLY PROFICIENT INCLUSIVE EDUCATION?

Throughout the book we will use a variety of terms to support your learning. The following terms are defined as they are used with the context of inclusion and equity using the lens of cultural proficiency.

Access involves opportunities for preK–12 students to fully participate in and benefit from high-quality curricular, instruction, and assessment experiences in school.

Cultural proficiency learning and leading is distinguished from other diversity and equity approaches in that it is anchored in the belief that, in order to be effective in a cross-cultural setting, a person must learn one's own assumptions, beliefs, and values about people and cultures that are different from him or herself.

Culturally proficient inclusive educational environments are created and maintained when educators intentionally use the four Tools of Cultural Proficiency and tenets of Inclusive Schooling for the benefit of all preK–12 students to fully participate in and benefit from high-quality curricular, instruction, and assessment experiences in school.

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

Inclusive Education (also referred to as Inclusive Schooling) is both the *vision* and *practice* of welcoming, valuing, empowering, and supporting the diverse academic, social/emotional language and communication learning of all students in shared environments and experiences for the purpose of attaining the desired goals of education: belonging, mastery, independence, and generosity.

Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) is the umbrella term used to describe a comprehensive school-wide and district-wide system of high-quality instruction and interventions for any student, regardless of whether that student is struggling or has advanced learning needs. It is designed to prevent the need for referral for special education services through early detection. The system is conceptualized as a three-tiered approach, with Tier 1 being high quality core instruction in general education and frequent student progress monitoring. Tier 2 involves supplemental, targeted interventions, particularly for students not making adequate progress on expected curriculum benchmarks. Tier 3 involves more intensive (e.g., more frequent and individualized) interventions for students whose response to Tier 1 and 2 instruction is deemed inadequate.

Professional learning is used in this book to reflect the changes required for teachers and administrators as active participants in their learning rather than passive receivers of only workshop presentations. Learning Forward, the national professional learning organization, shifted from using the term *professional development* to *professional learning*. Professional learning calls for educators to focus on knowing and doing in order to meet the needs of all students (Learning Forward, 2011). In support of the new term as continuous improvement, Lois Brown Easton states, "Developing is not enough. Educators must be knowledgeable and

wise. They must know enough in order to change. They must change in order to get different results. They must become learners and they must be self-developing" (2008, p. 756).

Student success and achievement is meeting formative and summative performance measures that ensure successful grade completion and high school graduation/completion as per state requirements.

ASSUMPTIONS WE HOLD

The co-authors held these assumptions as we wrote this book:

- Students learn best when they are in schools and classroom with educators, administrators, support personnel (e.g., psychologists, counselors, speech language pathologists, occupational and physical therapists), and paraprofessionals who hold a high value for students' cultures, their learning styles, their abilities and strengths, and their families.
- Students learn best when they are in schools and classroom with educators, administrators, support personnel, and paraprofessionals who hold a high value for inclusion and equity.
- Educators work inclusively and effectively when they value students' parents and guardians as critical resources for students' well-being and achievement during and beyond the school day.
- Professional learning that is intentional, inclusive, continuous, and focused upon system-wide goals and that uses the five Essential Elements for Cultural Competence leads to an expansion of Inclusive Schooling and a narrowing of access and equity gaps.
- The work of leading change toward Inclusive Education is not someone else's work; it is my/our work.
- Changing people's beliefs and perspectives causes emotional turmoil and, therefore, requires compassion and perseverance.

WHO ARE YOU?

As an active participant in this book, who are you? We invite you to engage with us as a reader and a writer as you begin this book. Some of you may have read cultural proficiency books prior to this one. You may already know about inclusive classrooms and schools. Now, you have the opportunity to discover more about yourself by using the lens of Cultural Proficiency to examine your current context and your journey as an educator in creating

an inclusive school, where *all* really does mean *all*. If this is your first time to read about the Tools of Cultural Proficiency and/or Inclusive Schooling, you have selected the perfect time to start your journey. We have provided reflective questions and blank spaces for you to write your thoughts and new questions. Welcome to this work. We are delighted to have you join us on our journey of challenges, rewards, reflections, new learning, and action toward creating and sustaining classrooms and schools where all students are welcomed, valued, and experience success because of who they are and the attributes they bring to school each day.

GOING DEEPER

What expectations are you holding as you have read the front matter and this first chapter? In what ways might this book support your learning as an educator?

How might this book help you and your colleagues as you work together on serving more/all students?

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Chapter 2 offers an introduction, definitions, and illustrations of the frameworks of Cultural Proficiency and Inclusive Schooling and answers the questions: Why use the Tools of Cultural Proficiency as a lens for examining the current work you are doing to better serve all students? How do inclusive learning environments address educators' questions for better serving students eligible for special education and other support services?