# Preface

**B**eware! This book is intended to disturb schools. This is a book of questions, not answers. Our questions are designed to prompt your best thinking about ways to serve the needs of all students in our PK–12 schools. We provide stories, tools, and strategies to help transform your thinking and behaviors to disturb the current environment in which you and other community members focus your work. The bottom line is student success. The responsibility for student achievement rests with educators engaged with community members focused on ways to better serve our students. If educating all students is neither your interest nor your responsibility, then you can stop reading, now, and donate this book to your school's professional library. We are not suggesting your current thinking is wrong; we are suggesting that you, the reader, examine your current practice and be willing to think about this question:

*In what ways might I think and behave with a community of learners to insure that all students perform at levels higher than ever before?*

And this one:

*What question will it take to shake up my thinking?*

The disturbance for which we shamelessly advocate and intentionally practice is one approach to changing how educators do business in schools. We propose that educators working in and with communities of co-learners who view diversity and difference as assets and opportunities rather than deficits and disadvantages have

greater opportunities to improve teaching and learning than those who work alone or in isolation from the larger school community.

The purpose of this book is to provide a lens through which to examine the goals, the intentions, and the progress of learning communities to which you belong or wish to develop. *Cultural Proficiency* is a frame through which team or group members view the context of their work. Cultural Proficiency is an *inside-out* approach for effective cross-cultural interactions. In other words, members of culturally proficient learning communities are willing to explore and assess their knowledge about the diversity of their communities, recognize the assumptions one makes about the cultural groups within their communities, and become more informed in order to be a more effective educator.

School leaders today are looking to professional learning communities (PLCs) as the answer to many of their questions about student achievement and school improvement. This urgency and rush toward implementing or imposing professional learning communities might cause one to ask, "If PLC is the answer, what was the question?" Many school leaders have discovered that declaring a team, or group, or entire school a PLC does not a professional learning community make. As Roland Barth (1991) said,

> We can work to change the embedded structures so that our schools become more hospitable places for student and adult learning. But little will really change unless we change ourselves. (p. 128)

Changing our attitudes, our beliefs, our behaviors, and ourselves is hard work. An easier approach is to find fault in others, assign blame, declare the work too hard, close our classroom door, and move on to something else. The metaphors of voice, song, and choir provide a way to represent the attitudes and behaviors of educators in today's context. Some schools are filled with voices who blame some teachers, some students, their parents, the school district, or current mandated programs for the low achievement scores of some students. While these voices may be loud singers of discontent these days, other voices sing in harmony about community-centered successes in reaching clearly focused goals for improved student achievement. This choir of community voices is the choir we invite you to join. Our choir members learn and practice the individual skills necessary to be a contributing member of the larger group. Our choir rehearses as a single unit focused on improving our performance. And ultimately,

we perform in ways that honor our diversity and support our entire community. Our rehearsals and our performances disturb the silence and the discord in ways that invite, encourage, and challenge others to join our community choir.

This book integrates the four *Tools of Cultural Proficiency* with the tenets of professional learning communities. We provide protocols, activities, and rubrics to convene conversations about the intersection of race, ethnicity, gender, social class, sexual orientation and identity, faith, and ableness with the disparities in student achievement. The authors believe the language, the tools, and the practices of Cultural Proficiency are missing from the current literature and practices of professional learning communities. This book proposes to address this omission by explicitly framing the work of learning communities through the lens of Cultural Proficiency.

Cultural Proficiency is a mind-set, a worldview through which to examine our beliefs, values, assumptions, and behaviors. This book defines and describes culture in its broadest sense. Culture is inclusive of and involves more than ethnic or racial differences. Culture is the set of practices and beliefs that is shared with members of a particular group and that distinguishes one group from others (Lindsey, Nuri Robins, & Terrell, 2003, p. 14). Culture includes shared characteristics of human description, including race, ethnicity, age, gender, sexual orientation and identity, faith, spirituality, ableness, geography, ancestry, language, history, occupation, and affiliations.

Readers and the cowriters of this book are members of various and diverse cultural groups, and we may hold several cultural aspects in common. For example, we bring our experiences as school leaders and our work toward creating equitable schools to this writing so we may better serve the needs of all students. We have written this book for school leaders who hold a passion for equity through collaborative community development. We define school leaders as teacher leaders, site and district office administrators, counselors, staff members, parents, and other community partners. We recognize that it takes both formal and informal leaders to achieve the learning goals we set for our students and ourselves. We invite you to keep your leadership role(s) in mind as you read this book. Welcome to our journey toward culturally proficient practices.

Parts I, II, and III of this book describe the chapters' contents and offer transitions and connections for the reader. Each chapter opens with an epigraph for the reader's reflection. The chapters are formatted for the reader to get centered with prompts for thinking, go deeper with descriptions and tools, and reflect using a series of

questions designed to guide the *inside-out* approach for culturally proficient practices.

Chapters 1 through 3 introduce the four Tools for Cultural Proficiency, explore the history of inequity in schools, review the current emphasis on professional learning communities, present a framework for integrating the two concepts, provide a new protocol called *breakthrough questions*, and demonstrate the practical aspects of culturally proficient learning communities through the context of the Maple View community. Chapters 4 through 9 provide voices from the field to give context and application of the tools for creating and sustaining culturally proficient learning communities.

Finally, Chapter 10 offers you an invitation for deeper thinking in order to surface your assumptions about learning communities and how those assumptions influence student achievement. The chapter offers protocols and activities to support your learning. The book concludes with a call to action.

> Warning:
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> This book is best used when in community with others. Once the community is engaged, the system of schooling as you know it will forever be curious, disturbed, and changed.

Strong warning? We mean it to be. The authors of this book intend to shake up your thinking and disturb current systems of inequity. We invite you to join us in our journey toward equity for all students through collective curiosity.