
Introduction

At long last, the issue of educating students from low-income or impoverished communities has gained currency! If you are an educator in quest of new and fresh ways to be successful with students from such communities, this may be the book for you. Then again, maybe not! Read on to find out “why” or “why not.”

We, the authors of this book, believe that effective approaches with students from low-income or impoverished communities begin with looking inward at ourselves as educators, as well as examining the schools and school systems for which we work. However, when we surveyed current approaches being sold and used in the market, we were struck by how many represent a “deficit approach” that deems our role as educators is to correct the deficiencies in students and, by implication, their parents/guardians.

Cultural proficiency is an “asset-based approach” that begins with the premise that students from low-income and impoverished communities are educable, and it is our role as educators to find out how best to get the job done. A related premise is that educators know the technical aspects of our roles, whether that is as a teacher, a counselor, an administrator, or a policymaker. Cultural proficiency acknowledges these two premises as being central to our effectiveness and adds the dimension of our needing to understand and value the culture of the student for us to develop an educator relationship with the student and the student’s community. Though, as you will see in Chapter 3, that we refute poverty as a distinct culture, we do regard low-income and impoverished communities as being comprised of people who have assets that when recognized and valued by their schools, heightens our effectiveness as educators.

Key Terms: Educator and What Happens on Campus

Please note two intentional uses in this book—use of the term “educator” and a focus on “what happens on school campus.” We use the term “educator” throughout the book to demonstrate the interdependence of teachers, counselors, administrators, staff members, and trustees and school board members. It is our experience that many efforts to close achievement gaps focus narrowly on changing teacher behavior or in developing principals as instructional leaders. While either approach may have merit, in isolation they too often lead to fragmentation and alienation. In Part I, “educator” is used as an inclusive term to communicate the interdependence of roles. In Part II, we present and discuss our roles as teachers, school leaders (formal and non-formal leaders), and policymakers (formal and non-formal leaders along with elected or appointed trustees and school board members). Part III is devoted to bringing these roles together in a manner that leads to an examination of school and school systems’ policies and practices along with educators’ values and behaviors.

“What happens on campus” is a central focus of this book. We use Cross’s (Cross, Bazron, Dennis, & Isaacs, 1989) term “inside-out approach” to guide our examination of what happens on campus. We make the case that there are socioeconomic conditions that surround our schools that are beyond our direct control, but we do have direct control over what occurs on our campuses. We cite research and academic references, present vignettes, and provide reflective and dialogic questions as opportunities to examine educators’ values and behaviors when in service to students and parents or guardians from low-income and impoverished communities. Similarly, you are invited to use these same resources to examine and change policies and practices as needed to be supportive of the education of children and youth within your school community.

We are very pleased to present this book to you and look forward to conversation with you about how the book informs your work and to your suggestions about how we can all get better at doing this very important work. Each of us—Randy, Michelle, and Keith—come to this work from different paths. Two of us are career preK–12 educators and university faculty members and the other is a social worker who has been working with preK–12 schools for several years. Three elements unite us in constructing this book for your use:

- Our belief that students from low-income and impoverished communities have the capacity to learn at high levels.

- Our belief that schools have the capacity to learn how to educate all students.
- Our belief that the styles of democracy in Canada and the United States are most effective when ensuring the rights and opportunities of historically marginalized groups of people.

How to Use This Book

We recommend that you read the chapters that comprise Part I first. Chapters 1 and 2 provide information that you may find edifying and that will inform your conversations and dialogues with colleagues. Should you be familiar with the tools of cultural proficiency, you may want to scan Chapter 3. Then, please read the chapters in Part II. You may want to focus on the chapter that speaks to your current role: Chapter 4 for teachers, Chapter 5 for school leaders, and Chapter 6 for policymakers. If you do focus on your primary chapter, we encourage you to read the other chapters to be familiar with what is being asked of other educators as they internalize inside-out approaches to their roles in your school or school system. Part III is designed for you, individually or collectively with colleagues, to organize your learning into your personal or professional or organizational change initiative.

The Resources section provides you with reference material. Resource A holds the conceptual framework of cultural proficiency and serves to support the presentation of the tools of cultural proficiency as presented in Chapter 3. Resource B presents the script for the State Teachers' Association retreat that a teacher from Pine Hills High School experiences. Resource C is the full text of Taniko's poem, passages of which appear in Chapter 4. Resource D is a matrix of the books about cultural proficiency.

Most important, thank you for your abiding interest in the education of children and youth from low-income and impoverished communities.