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# Introduction

**T**his book is about relationships. Educators working together to better serve all learners and members of school communities can confront the complex issues facing us in today's schools. Margaret Wheatley (2002) reminds us,

Relationships are all there is. Everything in the universe only exists because it is in relationship to everything else. Nothing exists in isolation. We have to stop pretending we are individuals who can go it alone. (p. 19)

Of the many topics facing educators today, creating safe and respectful educational spaces for members of LGBT communities has finally become a priority. As authors of this book, we present an approach built on beliefs and values of human dignity, democracy, and equity. We believe that by working together, valuing our diversity, and confronting inequities, we can create conditions for a culturally proficient education environment for LGBT and straight students and adults. Once again, we quote Margaret Wheatley,

Truly connecting with another human being gives us joy. The circumstances that create this connection don't matter. (p. 19)

Sexual orientation and gender identity are topics that prompt passionate responses in people in schools and communities across the United States and Canada. In many school communities, considering topics that address *lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, sexual orientation, homophobia, and heterosexism* topics is met with fierce resistance and hostility. Why does information and conversation about sexual orientation and gender identity provoke such emotions? How do we, as educators, craft positive, inclusive responses to counter negative comments? How do we create schools and communities that serve the educational and social needs of our students, faculty and staff, and community members that are inclusive of sexual orientation and gender identity? These are the questions that guided the authors to write this book.

## PURPOSE AND ASSUMPTIONS

The purpose of this book is to provide a guide for you by which heterosexual and homosexual students, faculty and staff, and community members are to be served equitably by our schools. In preparing this manuscript, we identified our assumptions that provided the basic threads for this book:

- All students, faculty and staff, and community members are to have full access to the educational community in ways that acknowledge their sexual orientation or gender identity.
- One's sexual orientation or gender identity is as normal as any other cultural or demographic characteristic one possesses.
- Schools' organizational culture (the way people behave around here) is an important medium through which individuals and their cultures, including sexual orientation, are valued.

### Why This Book Is Needed

During the final stages of assembling this manuscript, we received our monthly e-newsletter from Jer's Vision in Ottawa, Canada. We include it here because this young person makes the case for this book and others like it:

*Dear Randall:*

*My name is Zac Johnstone, and I am a Grade 12 student at Colonel By High School, in Ottawa, Ontario. I am also the leader of my school's SAFE club (Students Advocating For Equality) and a volunteer with Jer's Vision.*

*As one of the few openly gay students at my school, I have experienced bullying and homophobia. As such, I volunteer to help all students feel safer at school.*

*It is important for us to feel safe at school. I was once terrified to even come to school. When I decided to come out of the closet, it took me half a year to come up with the courage to tell my friends because I was afraid of how they would take it. My friends were and are amazing people who did not have an issue with my sexual orientation. However, they used slurs like "faggot" and "you're so gay" every day as part of their normal language, which made me afraid of how they would take my coming out. I recall opening up my Facebook page one day to see a picture of me defaced, by a couple of students at my school, with homophobic slurs like "fag" and "homo." I did not feel safe in my own school, a school known as one of the most accepting in the city, a place where I am supposed to be able to be myself and learn who I am. When I came out, I was lucky that they were supportive, but I know not everyone is as fortunate as me.*

*School should be a place where we all feel welcomed and accepted, a place where no one should have to go through bullying of any kind. It hurt me and it hurts everyone. This is why we need Jer's Vision. This organization promotes respect, diversity, and a positive space for everyone. They work toward the ultimate goal of true equality in our communities. Jer's Vision helps clubs like SAFE by giving us support, mentorship, and information that help us make our schools a better place to be.*

*With the help of Jer's Vision, my SAFE club has worked over the years to make our school better for everyone. Last year, we had a record of eight students at my school come out of the closet safely and this could not have happened without the assistance of Jer's Vision.*

*Right now, I am helping Jer's Vision to organize the upcoming bilingual Dare to Stand Out Conference in Ottawa on October 19. This conference will give youth like me the tools to make their school a bully-free place, ideas to raise awareness about equality, and help foster a culture of respect in schools.*

*Jer's Vision.org e-mail, October 3, 2012. JERSVISION*

*54 Somerset St. W, Suite 1 | Ottawa, Ontario K2P0H5 CA*

*E-mail: [info@jersvision.org](mailto:info@jersvision.org) | <http://jersvision.org> | <http://dayofpink.org>*

We wrote this book to illustrate that sexual orientation and gender identity are diversity, equity, and cultural topics needing to be included and addressed in our schools. Viewing sexual orientation and gender identity as cultural groups is about all of us, including our students, our fellow employees, and the diverse communities we serve. We all have a sexual orientation. Some of us are heterosexual while others of us are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender. Sexual orientation and gender identity can no longer be unmentionable topics in our schools. So the genie is out of the bottle, and as responsible educators and citizens, we must address the educational needs of LGBT communities as we do other cultural groups in our communities.

The content for this book is situated within the context of a diverse U.S., Canadian, and world community that includes sexual orientation and gender identity as important, too often overlooked, and purposefully marginalized demographic groups. Sexual orientation and gender identity are often avoided topics, yet always present and rarely acknowledged in educational discourse. In our earlier works, we have repeatedly made reference to sexual orientation, homophobia, and heterosexism, but as authors, we have not addressed the systemic underpinnings that have historically marginalized, and continue to this day to marginalize, students,

faculty, other school employees, and parents/guardians because of their sexual orientation or gender identity. We present in the Appendix how we, as authors, have grown to this place to be able to write this book. In doing so, in this volume we present a way for educators and members of their communities to learn and grow in ways that benefit all learners.

## **“PUSH BACKS” TO SEXUAL ORIENTATION AND GENDER IDENTITY**

As Zac’s letter implies, schools are complex cultural entities that reflect the communities in which schools are situated. Since 1964, schools in the United States, meaning the people who make up the organizations themselves, have had to make cultural changes in the manner in which they either resisted or embraced students because of their race, national origin, gender, special needs, and language acquisition while most often rendering sexual orientation and gender identity invisible. However, sexual orientation and gender identity have emerged as topics too long denied; they won’t go away. Nor should they go away. There are three prevalent ways that schools and their communities try to derail confronting the inequities visited on lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender students, faculty and staff, and community members:

- Focusing on bullying as an issue too often dismissed as “kids will be kids”
- Relying on questionable theological arguments
- Presenting confusing and myopic personal views on homosexual orientation and gender identity by limiting focus to sexual activity, whereas heterosexual people are presented as more dynamic and multidimensional

*Bullying and antibullying programs.* Unfortunately, sexual orientation and gender identity have become identified with bullying. We say, *unfortunate* because the bullying of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender students has surfaced the topics of sexual orientation and gender identity in ways that complicate informed discussion and decisions. Newspapers, magazines, and various forms of online media are constantly reporting instances of bullying and other forms of harassment that marginalize students, educators, and parents/guardians. Administrators, teachers, and counselors are well aware of the recent focus on bullying. Bullying and programs to help educators respond to bullying have taken center stage in school districts across the United States. Bullying is not new; bullying and harassment have been part of school classrooms and playgrounds all along. Why all of

the sudden interest in bullying and bullying prevention programs in schools? To adequately answer the question of “Why now?” we must delve into underlying issues. To help us understand at a deeper level, exploring the question of the recent focus on bullying and antibullying programs may provide useful clues:

*If bullying prevention programs are the answer, then what was the question?*

We have experienced numerous antibullying programs that avoid the undiscussable topics of sexual orientation and gender identity. Such programs do not prepare adult participants for thoughtful, productive learning. Conversations that lead to personal and organizational cultural changes within schools confront and undercut the often unstated, silent permission to marginalize people because of their being lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender.

*Theological arguments.* The United States and Canada are countries that guarantee each person the right to worship and believe as he or she chooses. This guarantee embraces the widest array of beliefs and practices, including those who choose no religious or formal affiliation. The United States also separates church from government/state and, thereby, limits the exercise of one’s beliefs in an educational setting if that person’s beliefs infringe on another person’s ability to be a fully functioning member of that community. The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedom similarly guarantees equality before the law that specifically includes sexual orientation and gender identity. In other words, one person’s religious rights do not take the place of another person’s civil rights.

*Myopic views of sexual orientation and gender identity.* In our work with educators and staff, students, and community members, we often encounter people whose views on sexual orientation and gender identity are sometimes limited to hypersexuality. They seem to be incapable of viewing relationships whether heterosexual or LGBT as infinitely more complex than sexual liaisons. Healthy relationships are grounded in attraction that can lead to lasting and complex relationships, whether heterosexual or homosexual (Campos, 2005; Murray, 2000).

## THE “INSIDE-OUT” PROCESS OF CHANGE

Cultural Proficiency is based in the notion that personal and organizational learning is an *inside-out* process (Cross, 1989). In our earlier works (Nuri-Robins, Lindsey, Lindsey, & Terrell, 2012; Terrell & Lindsey, 2009;

Lindsey, Nuri Robins, & Terrell, 2009; Lindsey, Roberts, & CampbellJones, 2005), we described and provided models for learning that are well received by teachers, leaders, and school district administrators and staff developers as well as university administrator and counselor preparation programs. This book adds to those works by providing the reader with a clear road map for learning as a personal journey.

In this book, we guide you to consider yourself within the context of the communities you serve. The book begins and ends with a focus on one's self with the premise that one cannot adequately lead change in schools or other organizations until one truly knows and understands oneself as a cultural entity and as an educator. The inside-out feature of Cultural Proficiency is an initial step in personal transformation and educational transformation. Cross (1989) and Campos (2005) in their seminal works locate school transformation as beginning with the recognition that for systemic change to occur it must, first, begin with how professionals view themselves in relation to the populations they serve.

In Part I, we initiate a discussion of equity and equality in our schools and related youth-serving organizations as a context for examining one's assumptions and beliefs about sexual orientation. We place particular emphasis on LGBT students, educators, and parents/guardians. The chapters in Part II guide use of the Essential Elements of Cultural Proficiency as a constructive means for creating personal and organizational change. The chapter in Part III is a guide in reflective and proactive use of the language and Tools of Cultural Proficiency for yourself and with your colleagues.

As the authors, we describe our own recognition and self-disclosure as an illustration of our inside-out growth processes, and in the Appendix we have included brief descriptions of how we came to write this book. Throughout the book, we use self-discovery processes of reflective journal writing and professional learning dialogic opportunities for the reader to locate, recognize, and eradicate internalized heterosexism and homophobia.

The Resources Section presents several aids to support your and your colleagues' professional learning. A book study guide is provided in Resource A.1 to guide your and your colleagues' examination of each chapter in this book. Resource A.2 is a depiction of the relationship of the Cultural Proficiency books to the original book, *Cultural Proficiency: A Manual for School Leaders*. Resource E presents the essential questions addressed by each of the cultural proficiency books. We commit these resources to you and your colleagues as you begin or continue your cultural proficiency journey.