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## Overcoming Self-Imposed Barriers to Moral Leadership<sup>1</sup>

*Do we have the will to educate all children?*

—Asa Hilliard (1991, p. 31)

### GETTING CENTERED

Upon reading Dr. Hilliard’s epigraph that opens this chapter, what thoughts, reactions, and questions does his query evoke for you? Take a moment and think about his question to us. Use the space to record your response.

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### MAPLE VIEW DISCOVERS WHAT IT CARES ABOUT

The Maple View Elementary School leadership team members have decided to have Dr. Brewer coach them on their Cultural Proficiency

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<sup>1</sup>AUTHORS’ NOTE: For purposes of consistency, material in this chapter is adapted from an earlier Cultural Proficiency book—Randall B. Lindsey, Kikanza Nuri-Robins, & Raymond D. Terrell. (2009). *Cultural proficiency: A manual for school leaders* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.

journey. Dr. Brewer initiated this process about two weeks ago and is very interested to find out how they are individually and collectively involved with creating a school culture committed to educating all children. He recognizes that this venture is not without risk, and he realizes this is a worthwhile risk if the Maple View School District is to be serious about educating all children and youth.

Dr. Brewer offered opening comments to the leadership team meeting: “Our state legislature enacted the Public School Accountability Act in 1999. How many of you were teachers, counselors, or administrators before that time?” Many participants raised their hands in acknowledgment. He noted that even though the staff and faculty were largely a veteran force, several were new to education. “Since that time our country has experienced national efforts to address achievement gaps in the forms of No Child Left Behind (2001) and Race to the Top (2009). It is important that we recognize that these legislative efforts launched an accountability movement that, though discontinuous across our country, has provided an opportunity to democratize education in ways that seemed unfathomable a generation ago.”

He continued, “Let me guide you in making a personal connection to the reality of the impact of accountability. How many began your education careers since 1999?” Several people raised their hands. “As a school district, we have been analyzing disaggregated data as required by our state’s Public School Accountability Act and No Child Left Behind since 2002.” Most nodded their heads, indicating their agreement with her. Dr. Brewer was aware that for many veteran administrators and teachers, learning how to use student data had been a new and often time-consuming process. For those who became educators since 2000, accountability measures were part of their everyday reality. However, both veteran and new educators recognized that in those early years, many schools resisted the new accountability measures. “Of those of you who raised your hands, how many were aware of the disparities that the disaggregated data have revealed?” Along with the participants, Sam Brewer raised his hand. He looked across the group and asked, “What does that say about us? We have been aware of these disparities for years but waited for the state and national governmental leaders to require us to get moving!”

Sam and the leadership team came face to face with the reality of the quote in the epigraph for this chapter: “Do we have the will to educate all children?” Asa Hilliard (1991) posed this question to our profession more than 20 years ago. However, we continue to struggle to answer it. The question invokes a sense of moral purpose or responsibility. The question carries with it a veiled accusation—that we have not been educating all children and, indeed, maybe we do not have the will to do so.

The achievement gap had been one of the worst kept secrets in the education community. It is, too often, the undiscussable issue that

educators grudgingly have acknowledged but often continue the struggle to find courage to explore in meaningful ways. The accountability movement provided the opportunity to examine disaggregated student achievement data by demographic groups. This has shed light on facts that we educators had hidden in aggregated student results. This illumination is revealing the genuine disparities and inequities that had been accepted by educators as “the way things are” or “We’re doing pretty well, considering. . . .” Long overdue in this ongoing discussion was admitting that there is an achievement gap. With accountability, those excuses are now “off the table,” and educators are beginning to concede the situation is an ethical and moral imperative (Fullan, 1991, 2003, 2010; Sergiovanni, 1992). In truth, we have been complicit in the undereducation, if not the noneducation, of our children and youth from low-socioeconomic, Native American, African American, Latino, English-learning, and special education groups.

In Chapter 6, we describe how culturally precompetent and culturally competent educators use the moral authority of their school leadership positions to successfully confront issues of oppression. We recognize that the word *oppression* is emotive for some people, and readers may react negatively to our use of this word to describe educational policies and practices. However, the disparities that are maintained in our educational system are, indeed, oppressive and serve to maintain the position, power, and privilege of the dominant group. Most assuredly, the term oppression is an appropriate descriptor for the fact that issues of undereducation continue to exist generation after generation.

Our experiences have revealed that many educators are stuck in trying to combat the continuing effects of “-isms”—racism, ethnocentrism, sexism, heterosexism, and ableism. The roadblock that people must circumvent often begins with what we refer to as “doing their own work.” First, a person must understand his or her own feelings about uncomfortable information. Second, the individual must take actions that are in the best interest of the students. This “feeling-to-action” connection either impedes or facilitates action.

### Reflective Activity

When you hear or use words such as *racism*, *ethnocentrism*, or *sexism*, what are the thoughts that come to mind?

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What feelings do the “-isms” words generate in you?

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Returning to Maple View Elementary School, we find members of the school leadership team continuing to struggle. Joan Stephens and Connie Barkley were commiserating about their most recent Cultural Proficiency session. Joan was struggling with her deep, emotional reactions to the session. She knew that Connie had sponsored the session and felt that she could share with Connie some of her concerns and questions:

**Joan:** Connie, you know from the very beginning, way back when Dr. Brewer first started talking about the journey to Cultural Proficiency, that I have been in full support of this effort. But, after our session yesterday, something is really bothering me.

**Connie:** What is it, Joan? How can I help you?

**Joan:** Well, I guess mostly by just listening.

**Connie:** Is it fair to ask “hard, maybe difficult” questions?

**Joan:** Oh, that’s scary. What do you mean?

**Connie:** Well, maybe I am anticipating your comments, but I am struck by your using the phrase about “being in full support of this Cultural Proficiency effort.” And then you attached the notorious “but.” Is that where you want to begin?

**Joan (somewhat deflated):** Well, yeah. I am stunned by how quickly you went to the heart of the matter. Connie, I listened to the speaker, I read the book, I engaged in the activities, but I cannot escape feeling blamed.

**Connie:** Describe for me what you mean by “feeling blamed.”

**Joan:** Arrrgggghh! Sometimes I feel angry; other times I feel guilty. However, I know those feelings are not productive, so I just sit on them.

**Connie:** No, you don’t, Joan. You internalize them to anger, guilt, or frustration. I am never sure which it is.

**Joan:** What do you mean?

- Connie:** Joan, we have been friends and colleagues for several years, and I think I know a little about you as a person. Frankly, Joan, you seem to want the Cliffs Notes version of Cultural Proficiency. I think Dr. Brewer has really tried to help us see that Cultural Proficiency isn't our latest project; it's a lens through which we can view our current work and our interactions with our students. Our values and beliefs are most evident in the assumptions we have about our students.
- Joan:** Connie, I think I understand that. But what do you mean about my wanting the "Cliffs Notes version of Cultural Proficiency"?
- Connie:** Remember what our facilitator said yesterday: We must understand systems of oppression and their impact. For example, think about racism and its effects on people at both a personal and institutional level.
- Joan:** Yeah. Okay.
- Connie:** Let me know if this makes sense to you. Racism negatively impacts both the victims and perpetrators. Let's take the historical periods of slavery and Jim Crow. African Americans were obviously impacted due to loss of personal liberty and being confined, at best, to second-class citizenship. At the same time, the rest of the population, mostly white, lost moral bearing in allowing such practices to persist. Does that make sense, Joan?
- Joan:** Unfortunately, yes, it makes a lot of sense. But I don't know what to do with the information and how that impacts the here and now of our school and my classroom.
- Connie:** Principally, Joan, until we confront legacies of racism, it interjects destructive energy into the system—like the school or a classroom. By understanding this double-edged impact, we are more able to see and feel the effects of oppression on our students and ourselves and work to combat it. We are more prepared to ask ourselves hard questions about our own assumptions and their effects. It's not easy to question our intentions and the intentions that are unwittingly institutionalized in our organizations. And yet, this is the only way we can change things. I particularly resonated with Dr. Brewer's comment that one of the major impediments to school reforms is that those who have benefitted from current practices don't see a need to change the way they do business. In other words, the system serves them well, so must something must be wrong with the students or their culture.

**Joan:** Let's suppose you are accurate and, believe me, I am beginning to see the situation in ways you describe them, then, why do I feel this way?

**Connie:** Your feelings are natural and normal, Joan, and a hard question you might ask is: "What are you willing to do, and how are you willing to change to create the best learning environment for all students at this school?" Joan, we can't be the observers in this change process. We are the leaders. Our feelings can be indications of being on the verge of deeper and more powerful learning.

**Joan:** You make my being stuck sound like resistance or denial.

**Connie:** Just imagine, Joan, if you have the feelings you are describing, what it is like for the students who are not succeeding at this school? And, you're a parent, Joan. Think about how your students' parents must feel when they don't see value added for their children being in our schools. They also may feel angry, guilty, and frustrated by the circumstances they are caught up in.

This conversation between Joan and Connie illustrates the authors' belief and experience that too often, educators stand on the sidelines, observing oppression and its disastrous results rather than becoming personally involved with them. As Dr. Brewer found out from his questions to his educator colleagues, we have known of the achievement gap for decades and as a profession have done alarmingly little about it (Perie, Moran, & Lutkus, 2005). As educational leaders, the questions for us are as follows:

- How did we arrive at these disparities in our schools?
- How do the forces of entitlement and privilege affect our profession?
- What are these feelings of anger and guilt, and why do I have them?
- What are our responsibilities as school leaders?

### **Reflective Activity**

What educational disparities for students do you see in your school or district?

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Please describe your reactions to the disparities in your school.

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## ENTITLEMENT AND PRIVILEGE AS EDUCATION HISTORY

At the dawn of the 20th century, a comprehensive education was an opportunity not available to most citizens. In one century, our country has progressed from offering a comprehensive public education to a small portion of the population to making public education available to most people. In the early 21st century, the promise and the possibility still exist, but the promise is unfulfilled. Well-informed educational leaders may be the linchpins of our democracy, serving our citizens in ways not envisioned by our counterparts a century ago.

During the past century, as this country matured, greater access to a comprehensive public education resulted from economic and legal pressures. The economic growth of the country demanded an increasingly better-educated workforce. However, women and people of color had to rely on judicial and legislative actions to participate fully in public education as a means for gaining entry into the economic mainstream of our country. School desegregation, Title IX, and Public Law 94–142 are examples of legislative and judicial steps used to gain access to educational opportunities.

However, access did not guarantee a quality education. Recently, and often because of the pressures exerted by judicial decisions and legislative actions, schools have begun to address the needs of diverse populations. The accountability movements that are in place in federal and state initiatives expect, for the first time in our history, all students, irrespective of their cultural backgrounds, will achieve a standards-based education. As controversial as these initiatives may be, they stand in a long line of modern educational initiatives. The most prominent of these initiatives was the *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education* (1954) decision that led to school desegregation. Desegregation efforts since the 1960s have been preoccupied with the thorny issues of physical access to school campuses and have only recently become involved with both the input and the output of the educational process. Prekindergarten through Grade 12 schools have experienced segregation, desegregation, and integration, and they still

struggle to provide an effective education to all sectors of society. Today's school leaders are in a unique position to become advocates for all children and youth to receive a comprehensive education and also to help build communities that affirm goals of academic and social success.

During the latter part of the 20th century, terms such as *diversity* and *multiculturalism* described a complex society that had always existed but was rarely acknowledged by the dominant culture. These changes are pushing us beyond unquestioned acceptance of the prevailing view of early 20th-century white male scholars who predominated in establishing the policies and practices of U.S. public education (Bohn & Sleeter, 2000; Sheets, 2000). The achievement gap is the lingering evidence of historical inequities and a persistent challenge to educational leaders.

Once people understand the concepts of entitlement and privilege, they must also have the will to make the ethical and moral choices implicit in such an understanding. One of the common denominators for all systems of oppression is that people lose rights and benefits because of discrimination against them. Privilege and entitlement occur when rights and privileges denied to one group of people accrue to others. These rights and privileges are often taken for granted in unrecognized and unacknowledged ways. For example, if you cannot vote because of your skin color and I can vote because of mine, functionally I have two votes—mine and the one denied to you. Similarly, if I have access to an enriched educational experience that involves higher thinking skills and you are assigned, year after year, to low-level direct/drill instruction, I will be better prepared than you to perform well on any measure of academic success placed before me.

## TRANSFORMATIVE LEADERSHIP

As you will read in Chapter 6, moving from being culturally precompetent to being culturally competent entails a shift in thinking. A component of this shift in thinking is to understand the concepts of entitlement and privilege and their relationship to systems of oppression. Racism and other forms of oppression exist only because the dominant group benefits from the continued practices. Culturally competent educational leaders shift their thinking and are intentional in understanding not only the negative consequences of oppression but also the benefits of those same systems.

We must become “the change we want to see” (Gandhi, 2002). Mahatma Mohandas K. Gandhi's words let us know that we are at the heart of creating the world we envision. Dismantling systems of oppression, such as racism, requires transformation that necessarily involves the deconstruction of power in both personal and institutional forms. Weick (1979) holds that organization is a myth and that “most ‘things’ in organizations are actually relationships



“tied together in systematic fashion” (p. 88). In other words, we invent social organizations through our interactions with one another. Cultural destructiveness and Cultural Proficiency are similarly invented ways of organizing our social interactions. The choice is ours: We can continue to perpetuate historical racism and inequity, or we can lead our organizations to historical levels of effectiveness and achievement. It is all invented: A human invention is created by those within the system called “school” (Zander & Zander, 2000).

Leadership that leads to change can be characterized as transactional, transformational, or transformative. Shields (2010) describes each type of leadership:

- 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 principal 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 (pp. 563–564).

Culturally proficient educational practices, and leadership, are exemplified through the standards described in the culturally precompetent, culturally competent, and culturally proficient environment illustrations in Chapter 6. Culturally proficient education exists within the context of our moral authority as educational leaders. Making the shift from culturally precompetent to culturally competent involves three aspects of our moral authority:

- Recognizing the dynamics of entitlement and privilege,
- Recognizing that our schools contribute to disparities in achievement, and
- Believing that educators can make choices that positively affect student success.

Cultural competence and Cultural Proficiency require a leadership perspective that involves an inside-out approach to personal and organizational

change. Culturally proficient leaders redefine education in a democracy to be inclusive. These leaders focus on inequity and equity, regardless of who is benefiting from the current status. They focus on confronting and changing one's own behavior to learning from and how to serve the educational needs of new groups in the community, rather than how to change and assimilate members of target groups. Culturally proficient leaders expect criticism from influential people, and they operate in school districts by remaining centered on the moral value in our work as educators.

Coming to grips with privilege and entitlement is not without risk. The risk comes in questioning the process of public schooling and the institutional structures, policies, and practices that shape the learning processes in schools. Understanding privilege and entitlement and questioning the systems that support them require countering the legacy of history that has provided us with an educational system that is designed to educate some students and not others. Therefore, the hard question becomes: How have I benefited from the privilege and entitlement accorded to me as a result of my skin color, gender, social class, sexual orientation, age, and experience (Kovel, 1984; Tatum, 1999)?

### **Reflective Activity**

What is entitlement or privilege?

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How do you relate entitlement or privilege to “-isms,” such as racism or sexism?

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What are the risks involved for you as you transform your behaviors from cultural blindness to cultural precompetence?

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## FACING ENTITLEMENT: THE CONUNDRUM OF ANGER, GUILT, OR CONFIDENCE

Reactions to new information can often be discomfoting. What was your reaction to the “hard question” in the preceding section? For many people, engaging in conversation about the topics of privilege and entitlement can generate an emotional reaction that ranges from anger to guilt. However, once people acknowledge and understand their very real feelings about this new learning, along with their recognition of the very real outcomes of privilege and entitlement, they are ready to begin learning to work more effectively with students and communities that are culturally different from theirs. This level of learning is empowering in that an individual can consciously direct his or her own learning and can continue discovering ways to be effective in working in cross-cultural situations (Cross, 1989; Freire, 1970, 1999). In the following vignette, you will see how two educators at Maple View Elementary School surface their feelings about entitlement and privilege:

**Joan:** You know, I can take this discussion of racism and sexism, when the presenters are not so aggressive. Enough is enough!

**Connie:** What do you mean by aggressive?

**Joan:** Well, she just kept presenting information that is so very uncomfortable.

**Connie:** But I do recall her asking about your reactions to the information and what your thoughts were. How is that aggressive? Do you think it would have been different for you if a white male had presented the information?

**Joan:** Why would you ask me if I would have reacted differently had the presenter been white male?

**Connie:** Well, as I see it, the presenter was not aggressive toward you. She merely presented ideas that you appeared to find upsetting.

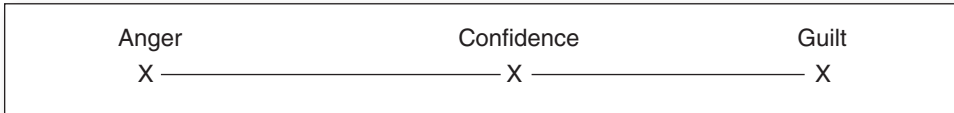
**Joan:** Upsetting? How the hell can you say that?

**Connie:** Look at yourself right now—you have raised your voice, and you are pointing your finger right in my face. If that is not anger, I don’t know what is!

**Joan:** Listen, dammit, I resent people trying to make me feel guilty for something I did not create. I am fully prepared to be accountable for my actions, but I am not going to feel guilty for what “history” or “institutions” have done to anyone!

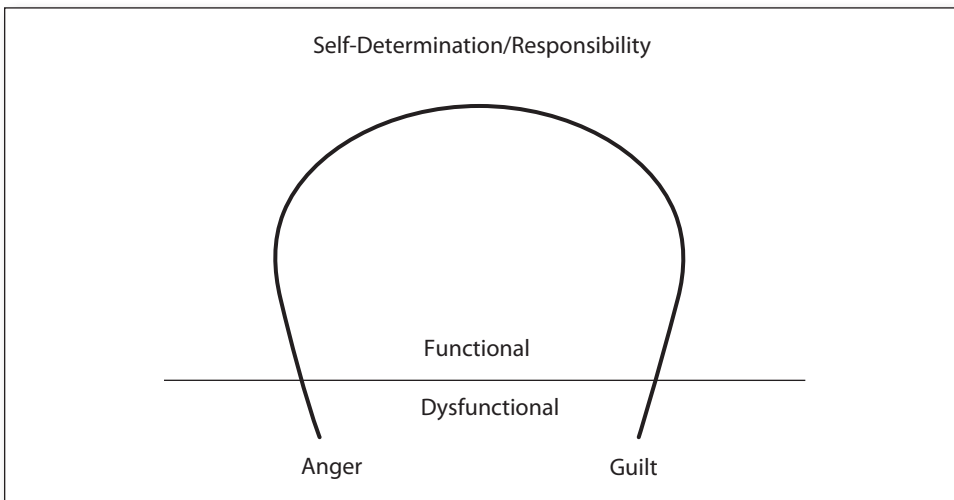
Educators such as Joan often become upset when discussing oppression and act out forms of anger or guilt or both. Figure 3.1 represents this range of reactions. People who have the ability to listen to the information and not accept the information as anger or guilt are confident they can use the information for constructive purposes.

**Figure 3.1** Continuum of Reactions to Information About Oppression



Educational leaders who choose to remain angry or guilty when dealing with facts about the disparate success of students identified in demographic groups of race, gender, sexual orientation, social class, language acquisition, or special needs contribute to their own paralysis of inaction or inappropriate action. Figure 3.2 indicates that feelings of anger and guilt, although very different, are similarly dysfunctional for school leaders. The sense of frustration that arises from feelings of anger and guilt leads to inaction, which does not benefit underachieving students. Worse, the sense of frustration can lead to actions that are counterproductive for underachieving students. However, the educational leader who moves beyond his or her initial feelings to understanding the underlying issues of oppression is able to confront such issues with confidence. The leader’s confidence is rooted in having made a moral decision to choose to use methods and materials that are effective for each demographic cultural group of students at the school.

**Figure 3.2** Functional and Dysfunctional Reactions to Issues of Oppression



*Moving Forward With Confidence.* Making conscious, intentional choices is a mark of an educator who strives to improve his or her practice. Typically, for teachers and counselors, practice is improved by selecting and delivering curriculum and instruction that meet the needs of each and every demographic student group. For school administrators, practice is improved through marshaling resources in support of high-quality curriculum and instruction. Members of professional organizations and unions improve practice by ensuring that their core values address service to their students. At the policy-making level, improvement of practice involves school board members and district administrators setting and implementing policy that provides access for students from all sectors of the community. The confident person is proactive and asserts his or her needs, opinions, and views. This person also takes responsibility to facilitate others, particularly those who are silent, in understanding that their feelings may be an important avenue to new learning.

What is different about the members of these two groups of educators—those stuck in dysfunction and those who are able to move forward with confidence? The difference is the successful transition in a shift in thinking and disposition from cultural destructiveness, cultural incapacity, or cultural blindness to cultural precompetence and, eventually, cultural competence. The point between these two positions is what Gladwell (2000) termed the “tipping point.” It is that point in time when a shift in thinking occurs. The shift in thinking occurs when the educational leader sees the behaviors of cultural destructiveness, incapacity, and blindness as inauthentic and inappropriate and is willing to shift to the arenas of possibility provided by culturally competent behaviors. The shift in thinking occurs when leaders recognize their stereotypic feelings and reactions and, through processes of reflection and dialogue, begin to examine their practice. You can see it in their eyes and hear it in their language; it is a moment of surprise, often expressed as a cognitive shift (Costa & Garmston, 2002; Schon, 1987). Through a cognitive process, the person actually begins to think in different ways. The evidence of the shift in thinking is observable in a person’s newly stated beliefs and intentional actions as well as in physical and emotional reactions. This energy to do things differently and right is expressed through facial and posture changes.

## **REFLECTIONS ON ENTITLEMENT: A PINE HILLS ELEMENTARY SCHOOL CONVERSATION**

Recognition of one’s feelings or reactions is a first step to being able to constructively deal with issues of oppression in our schools and communities.

Let us return to the discussion between our two educator colleagues from Maple View School District's Pine Hills Elementary School. Joan is identifying how she has acknowledged her feelings and has begun to examine the deeper issues of how students are performing. She is becoming receptive to how she can make constructive choices to influence the learning of students:

**Connie:** It sure seems to me that you have personalized this entire presentation. I sat at the same table as you but had a very different reaction.

**Joan:** What do you mean?

**Connie:** I related the speaker's presentation to our current work on serving the needs of students identified as "underperforming." I must admit to moments of discomfort when she asked us to substitute "underserved" for "underperforming." Yes, I do feel a twinge when we realize schools are systems of oppression. But I have begun to focus on her comment, "When you feel that twinge of emotion, look to see if you are on the verge of deeper learning." For me, the deeper learning is involved with how can we become effective with students who are not being successful in our schools.

**Joan:** Well, if their parents don't even care . . .

**Connie:** Wait just a minute! You are feeding into just what the presenter described.

**Joan:** What do you mean?

**Connie:** By focusing solely on the parents, you are not considering the power and authority we have as educators. If we believe our students have the capacity to learn, then we can learn different and better ways in which to teach them. You do remember the EdTrust PowerPoint presentation, don't you? The one in which numerous schools with demographics just like ours are being very successful? It is about our taking responsibility to research, to find, and to use materials and approaches that work for our students and us.

Joan is being coached by Connie to look beyond her initial, personal reaction and examine her underlying assumptions about her students and their parents. Joan is on the verge of being able to exercise direct influence over how she views and works with her students and their parents. At this point, Joan, if she so chooses, will be more able and willing to begin examining her practice—the one thing over which she has total control—to see how she can work differently with her students. As Joan experiences this transition, she will feel more empowered. Her empowerment is her personal transformation.

### Reflective Activity

What is your reaction to this section on anger, guilt, or confidence?

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If you were to design a desired shift in thinking for yourself, what would it look like?

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### REFLECTIONS ON ENTITLEMENT: OPPRESSION, ENTITLEMENT, OR SELF-DETERMINATION AND PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY?

The types of comments Joan made in the previous vignette are not new or surprising. They proliferate in the conversations that we hear in informal settings in schools at all levels (i.e., prekindergarten to university). People who make such comments do not seem to understand that people's experiences in our society vary greatly. For example, we have made presentations in which the demographics of schools and the inequities that exist are presented in quantitative detail. However, the same question arises almost every time. No amount of data can forestall it. The most compelling information on the underachievement of children from low socioeconomic backgrounds cannot derail it. The question is as follows:

This is all well and good; however, how am I supposed to react when a student approaches me to contribute to a fund for Latino/Latina scholarships? Now, I am a fair person. I came from a poor background. Why can't we just contribute to scholarships for all students of need?

Other times, it is in the following form: "As a school board member or administrator, it gets real tiring having these special-interest groups assail

us at board meetings! Please, what are we to do with these groups? Why can't we treat everyone the same?" The following is another example:

Why do we educators have to take the blame for students not achieving? Why doesn't anyone look at which students are the behavior problems in this school? Has it occurred to anyone that these are the kids who are low achievers? You don't think this is an accident, do you?

We do not doubt that the questions are often sincere and earnest. We do not doubt that these educators, who are gender diverse and of many ages and many cultural backgrounds, sincerely have these questions. However, one thing is inescapable: an underlying tension of anger, guilt, or frustration seems to accompany the question. Our response often begins with the following statement: "An important aspect of Cultural Proficiency is not so much what we learn about other people, but what we learn about our reactions to other people."

Our observation is that those who are privileged or entitled are often unwilling or unable to see the oppression that others experience (Bohn & Sleeter, 2000; Shields, 2010). Therefore, like Joan, when some people are confronted with new data or perspectives, their reactions are expressed as anger, guilt, or frustration. The inability to see how others experience our schools is very limiting. Several cultures acknowledge this limitation with maxims such as "You cannot understand me until you have walked a mile in my shoes." Not being able to see our entitlement limits our ability to move forward in our own learning to educate children from backgrounds different from ours to high levels of achievement. The damaging effects of racism and other forms of oppression are exceeded only by the unwillingness or inability of dominant society members to make the commitment to use one's entitlement to end oppression.

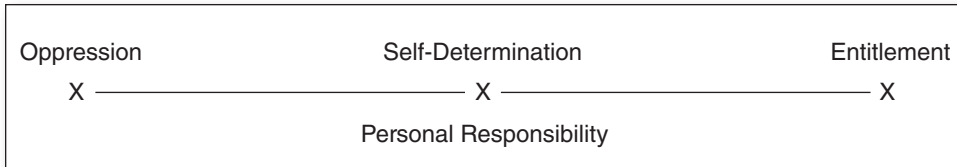
## **SELF-DETERMINATION AND PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY: FROM FEELINGS TO ACTION**

The feelings of anger, guilt, and self-confidence represented in Figures 3.1 and 3.2 have behavioral counterparts—namely oppression, entitlement, and self-determination/personal responsibility. Figure 3.3 represents a range of reactions, from oppression to entitlement, with self-determination and personal responsibility being the midpoint. In the same way that anger and guilt are opposite feelings and reactions, oppression and entitlement are opposite behaviors, and they too can lead to one being paralyzed and dysfunctional in making effective changes for our schools. The middle point of



this continuum represents self-determination for those who are from historically oppressed groups, and it represents personal responsibility for those who are from privileged and entitled groups. The common denominator for both the oppressed and the entitled members is that they have constructive, functional choices to make and actions to take as educators.

**Figure 3.3** Oppression-Entitlement Continuum



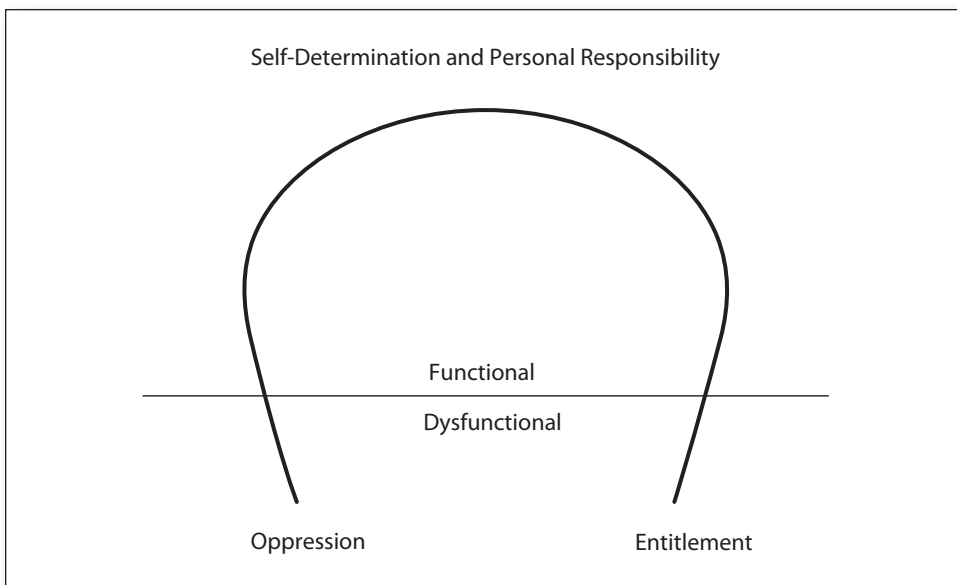
Oppression is the consequence of racism, sexism, ethnocentrism, or heterosexism. Overt acts of oppression serve to deny the benefits of society to people based on their membership in a group. Throughout our country's history, visible acts of oppression in schools include tracking programs that precluded or limited mobility for specific ethnic or racial groups, chronic achievement gaps among groups, suspension and expulsion rates that are disparate among groups, and curricula that represent only dominant society. Less obvious, although no less pernicious, acts of oppression include lowered expectations, biased testing, and ethnocentric history and literature textbooks. Biased testing creates a reverse affirmative action. Ethnocentric textbooks have given the dominant society a mythical view of its role in the growth of this country and made all others invisible, exotic, or dehumanized. These practices are a significant part of our history and culture that, for too long, dominant society has tried to ignore. The very act of ignoring these issues is a choice reserved for only the entitled and privileged.

**Self-Determination.** Our experience is that when issues of oppression are raised, many of us who are from historically oppressed groups sometimes become agitated and angry that others in the group are either naive or resistant to hearing about our legacy of oppression. For people from historically oppressed groups, the struggle is to recognize systemic and systematic oppression and to commit oneself to self-determination. Possibly the ultimate oppression is for one to accept the notion that the system is so hopelessly racist, sexist, ethnocentric, or heterosexist that there is nothing one can do. This position robs one of personal power. Conversely, people from these historically oppressed groups who understand oppression are able to confront dysfunctional systems and network with others to take control of their personal and professional lives. They are not seduced by tokenism but work with their colleagues to become leaders in developing policies and practices that serve the historically underserved.

**Personal Responsibility.** The challenge for many of us who confront the concept of entitlement for the first time is that the benefits are often unrecognized and unacknowledged. The privileges of entitlement—to the entitled—are often invisible and appear to be just the way the world is. Entitled people may see oppression, be disgusted by it, and never consider that they have directly benefited from the systematic oppression of others. To become aware of and to acknowledge entitlement is a sign of growth and strength. To understand both oppression and entitlement is the first step to self-determination and personal responsibility.

Figure 3.4 presents oppression and entitlement as being similarly dysfunctional. The functional alternatives are self-determination and personal responsibility.

**Figure 3.4** Functional and Dysfunctional Reactions to Oppression and Entitlement



After entitled people understand and recognize oppression and the benefits of entitlement, they then have a moral choice to make. To do nothing, once informed, is tantamount to the immoral position of conspirator. The moral position is to commit oneself to end oppression. Although entitled people may work with oppressed groups to oppose acts of oppression, their major responsibility is to work within schools and districts to raise the consciousness of the uninformed entitled. They focus their energies on changing policies, practices, and behaviors that perpetuate oppression and entitlement, recognizing that the two are inextricably interconnected.

Similar to the discussion about movement from anger and guilt to confidence, educators who transcend the oppression and entitlement responses and, instead, opt for self-determination and personal responsibility have demonstrated the willingness to reflect on their practices for the purpose of providing their students access to high-quality educational experiences. Educators such as these demonstrate the ability to reflect on their practices while working with students, as well as to think back on their practices, for the purpose of continuous improvement. These educators have made the shift in thinking from cultural destructiveness, cultural incapacity, and cultural blindness to cultural precompetence and cultural competence. The language of these educators shifts from “why these students cannot succeed” to statements such as “These are different ways in which I would like to approach my work with our students.”

Informed, entitled people understand that to confront unacknowledged privileges inherent in institutional values, policies, and practices that perpetuate disparity takes keen insight and commitment to moral authority. School leaders can be pivotal in ensuring that we, all of us, are part of the discussions about diversity. Let us revisit Joan and Connie, who have been talking about these issues, and see how they are handling these topics:

**Joan:** Okay, so I am beginning to understand. My feelings are more about resistance than anything. I can see that now. I can't say that I am totally comfortable with this whole notion yet, but I can appreciate that we have to do something. I am beginning to understand your feedback that I want to “short-circuit” the system of learning about Cultural Proficiency.

**Connie:** With that, we can make a start. How is it you recognize, within yourself, that you have been avoiding the deeper learning?

**Joan:** Well, it has to do with the presentation the other day. I have been thinking—no, hoping—that all of this fuss about diversity was that I was going to need to learn particular strategies in working with low-performing students.

**Connie:** How do you see it now?

**Joan:** I am not totally certain, but I know it has to involve my looking at what I expect from my students, how I interact with them, and my knowledge of how students learn. In some ways, it is as if I am starting all over again as a teacher.

**Connie:** Yes, it is about learning and unlearning; however, the main difference between now and when we began our roles as educators is that we have a storehouse of knowledge of what does and what does not work.

- Joan:** Well, this diversity training must be awfully burdensome for you.
- Connie:** How do you mean?
- Joan:** You already know all of this stuff, don't you?
- Connie:** Hardly! Though I am a person of color, there is much for me to learn about working with all groups. However, probably the most important role I see for myself is to make sure that I keep these issues on the table for all of us to face. That is a challenge that I welcome.
- Joan:** Yeah. And, that is a challenge I have to share with you. It is like the speaker said the other day: "We have to approach each of these students like we would want people to approach our own children." That sure makes it personal.

Being culturally precompetent is often described as knowing what you do not know. It is not having the answers but being able to know when current practices are not serving students. Cultural precompetent educators demonstrate a willingness to learn about their students' cultures, learning styles, and communities in which they live. Culturally competent educators reflect on their practices using the lens of the five Essential Elements—assessing their cultural knowledge, valuing diversity, managing the dynamics of difference, adapting to diversity, and institutionalizing cultural knowledge. Culturally competent educators are committed to the inside-out approach of Cultural Proficiency as they continuously examine their values and behaviors and seek to improve their practices.

### Reflective Activity

In Chapter 6, we will invite you to identify three bold steps for Cultural Proficiency at your school. How might this chapter inform that process for you?

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What questions do you have to guide your continued learning?

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Dr. Brewer left that day confident the Maple View Elementary School had begun the task of moving forward with learning how to move the staff and the school toward being culturally proficient. He sat in his car for a few minutes to reflect on today's session. He thought to himself,

I think the leaders at this school are beginning to view reform as a very personal, transformative choice. I do know that learning about entitlement and privilege will be a continuous challenge for all of us. However, we have to continuously ask ourselves, "In what ways can I change my practices to benefit all students?"

Chapter 4 presents the Guiding Principles of Cultural Proficiency as core values for your consideration. The Guiding Principles provide a healthy, constructive path for developing personal and organizational effectiveness in widening the purpose of schools in ways that serve all students equitably.