

Foreword

The most pressing issues in American public education continue to center around how to provide the most meaningful and appropriate education for students and their families, especially those from groups that have been historically and contemporarily marginalized by schools. Among these include students whose families have low incomes, students for whom English is not a primary language, and students from ethnically and culturally diverse backgrounds.

Teachers are the most important key to providing this meaningful and appropriate education. Teachers can work with their students to develop caring relationships, promote critical thinking skills, assure academic skill development, and engage in the broader community to address pressing social challenges. And the best teachers find ways to do all of these during a school year.

Accomplishing these ends is no simple feat. It is complicated when teachers do not come from nor fully understand the students (as well as their families and the communities) in their charge. It is complicated by the limitations of their own education when it does not effectively prepare them to cross cultural boundaries competently. Even when teachers have developed this competence, it is complicated by the pressing demands placed on teachers: the emphasis placed on limited accountability measures to gauge what students know, the implementation of a scripted curricula which undermines pedagogical creativity, and the press to conform to top-down educational mandates and reforms.

What is needed, now more than ever, is direction to teachers in order to achieve the ideals that they have for themselves and for their students. These ideals need to include helping every student to achieve academic excellence and to realize their full potential. But these ideals also need to include the character and courage required to assure that democracy, equity, and social justice permeate their work (classroom and school-community) environment.

I am honored to provide the foreword to this book, *Navigating Cultural Competence in Grades 6–12*. Nancy Gallavan brings to this task a broad

understanding of the role educators must play in assuring that the excellence they seek is accompanied by equity and social justice. I appreciate that this work acknowledges the complexity of this work: the challenges associated with responding to continual change, combating persistent forms of oppression, and teaching for equity and justice.

The idea of “navigating” is a productive analogy for the work of teachers. In preparing to teach, you most likely have a map that provides a general lay of the land in education. Only when you arrive at the places (classrooms, schools, and communities) where you find yourself will you see the full details of these milieu: the individuals who inhabit these spaces, the specific challenges and opportunities of being there, and the skills and knowledge that will help you to not only survive but to thrive.

This book also provides a set of skills and knowledge that will help you to navigate the different terrains you will encounter. Teachers today, beyond being experts in teaching, learning, and curriculum, need a variety of other skills to be successful in school settings. *Navigating Cultural Competence in Grades 6–12* provides you with an opportunity to develop these skills associated with affirming difference, building community, fostering professionalism, and pursuing social justice.

At end, however, having the skills, knowledge, tools, and desires to pursue a direction can never fully prepare you for the actual journey. Life as a teacher is full of the unexpected, the uncertain, and the unknown. Teachers are, after all, dealing with people (students, colleagues, school staff, administrators, caregivers, community activists, etc.) and institutions (schools) that can never fully be “knowable.” Rather than stopping you from the journey, it is better that you embrace the unknown. Strong in purpose and clear in focus, your journey begins with a single step. Forging strong, positive relationships with all those around you assures that you’ll never be lost and never feel alone.

The Spanish poet Antonio Machado described this journey aptly:

Caminante, son tus huellas
el camino, y nada más;
caminante, no hay camino,
se hace camino al andar.
Al andar se hace camino,
y al volver la vista atrás
se ve la senda que nunca
se ha de volver a pisar.
Caminante, no hay camino,
sino estelas en la mar.

Wanderer, your footsteps are
the road, and nothing more;
wanderer, there is no road,
the road is made by walking.
By walking one makes the road,
and upon glancing behind
one sees the path
that never will be trod again.
Wanderer, there is no road—
Only wakes upon the sea.

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