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## CHAPTER 4

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# CASE STORIES AS LESSONS

*“Stories constitute the single most powerful weapon in a leader’s arsenal.”*

Dr. Howard Gardner

**T**he purpose of this chapter is to illuminate the theoretical tools of Cultural Proficiency with real-life stories. As you read the case stories, look for the ways the authors reflect their understanding and use of the tools of Cultural Proficiency to change the mindset of colleagues, staff, and community and to make decisions and take action to achieve equitable outcomes for underserved students. What levels of the Cultural Proficiency Leadership Rubric do you see enacted? And which essential elements are demonstrated or leveraged by the leaders to navigate the changes they wish to make? At the end of each case story, we have provided an opportunity for you to reflect on what occurred and add your own insights about how you would handle the situation.

Notice the subtle but important differences between the actions of the culturally competent leader and those of the culturally proficient leader. The culturally competent leader is an advocate for those whose voices are silenced, limited, or ignored by schools/organizations. The culturally competent leader helps students navigate the barriers to success. The culturally competent leader listens and observes to redress wrongs. The culturally proficient leader is an activist who often sounds the alarm, challenges the status quo, and removes the barriers to success. The culturally proficient leader is not “afraid to make some noise and get in good trouble, necessary trouble” (Lewis, 2018). How do these leaders exemplify culturally competent and culturally proficient leadership?

We wrote these case stories based on our moral imperative to correct a wrong. As you read each one, consider the following guiding questions. Then select one case story from the first three and write your reflection in the space provided, based on the leadership rubric. Consider your professional and lived experiences as you reflect on the questions below for your selected case story.

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Describe the moral imperative that drove the author's work in your selected case story.
2. Identify key strategies the author implemented in the case story.
3. What other strategies might have been implemented?
4. Consider the leader's role in taking risks on behalf of students in the face of obvious staff, community, or even elected official disagreement. How much risk is too much? What consequences should the leader consider?
5. Based on your professional experiences, cite similar examples of students being denied an equitable education. What risks are you personally willing to take to make a difference in students' lives?

## CASE STORY ONE: CARMELLA S. FRANCO

### Students Denied Opportunities to Optimize Success

#### *Context*

In 2010, I was appointed by the State Board of Education (SBE) to serve as the state trustee of a school district in Monterey County, California. The SBE had taken the powers away from this district and its board of education due to failure to meet the educational needs of English learners. So egregious were the data, this was the first and only time the state had executed this option. The district was 95 percent Hispanic, and many students came from migrant families. The rates at which English-learner students were being reclassified to English were abysmal. I made a highly controversial decision to change the existing practice whereby Spanish-speaking students were expected to transition to English-proficient and English-only instruction by the end of third grade. That practice assumed that students would make a smooth transition from third-grade Spanish proficiency to third-grade English proficiency. I was appalled by the longitudinal data that showed that students who had begun in the district as non-English-speaking kindergartners and

were now in eleventh grade were still categorized as English learners and non-proficient in English. That was after eleven years in the system! Armed with those data, I enacted an initiative to ensure that students were afforded the opportunity to learn English. The initiative was laid out in four semesters for kindergarten through first grade, with the students beginning as non-English speakers and progressing to English-only instruction by the end of first grade.

### *Complexity*

The teachers, with the exception of a handful, were excited to embark on the journey of ensuring that students transitioned from Spanish to English instruction by the end of first grade. Parents thanked me for “allowing their children to learn English in school.” The curriculum was developed and unveiled for immediate implementation. I was amazed by the progress I witnessed as I visited classrooms. I saw chart paper with the students’ work and stories written in English and listened to the students responding in English during their lessons. At the end of the first year of implementation, the state California English Language Development Test (CELDT) results showed that students had excelled, most having met the requirements for reclassification to English proficient on this state assessment test. Despite this, a group of twenty or thirty district and community members, some not associated with the district, spoke against the initiative at most board meetings. They argued that the original bilingual instructional program for kindergarten and first grade should be restored to replace the initiative, the reason being: “*This is the way we have always done it.*” On a daily basis I also dealt with district board and interim leadership who attempted to undermine my actions, but because of my firm belief in the rights of children to a quality education, the published efficacy of the program being implemented, and my high expectations for both students and staff to be successful with the new initiative, I did not back down, give in, or apologize.

### *More Complexities*

Busloads of parents—who we later discovered were paid—traveling to Sacramento to speak against the initiative at SBE meetings was a monthly event. SBE members were pressured by myriad groups, including California legislators, who wanted power returned to the district’s previous board members, who now served in a strictly advisory role. The issue of students not being afforded the opportunity to learn English and not being successful in society was not on their front burner, as their interests were solely adult-issue driven. I was summoned to meet individually with local legislators. I was told by one elected official that there were people who wanted to “take me out.” I had acid poured on my car, and I never had it removed. I drove

into the district parking lot every day with that burn mark on my car to show that I was not leaving. I could have had hired security but chose not to during my twenty-five months in the district as state trustee. My focus was on improving learning for a group of students whose educational needs had been ignored for too long.

### *Relevance*

Advocating for this particular implementation was not an easy decision for me as a Latina, former bilingual teacher, and Title VII director. I was even accused of being anti-bilingual education. That was a ridiculous accusation. My decision was not about bilingual versus monolingual English instruction. It was about quality instruction that met the language readiness and learning needs of this group of students.

From the day I decided to implement the Learning English initiative, I never took the blinders off. My mission was to keep politics out of the classroom and to ensure that students were being provided with the instruction they needed to be successful. If we'd had the luxury of offering intensive professional development and other resources to impact the quality of instruction over time, I might have taken a different route. However, there was no time to do that. Each day that passed, more and more underserved students were receiving less and less of what they needed. In spite of the controversy and the negative reaction of some in the school community, my decision and leadership were supported by the SBE and its president, for which I am grateful to this day and which helped me stay the course. The bilingual program in grades two and three continued in the district, and model dual-language programs were being studied for implementation during and after my tenure. The struggle was worth it.

### *Reflections*

This is the first time I have written in any detail about those twenty-five months as the state-appointed trustee of this district. That span of time was difficult, sometimes painful, due to the way my intentions were distorted, and I was personally vilified. But this was also a time of reaping the benefits and rewards of risk-taking that resulted in positive outcomes. At the end of the second year of implementation of the new instructional program, this district was the only one in Monterey County to show two consecutive years of growth on the CELDT. Other districts in the county showed growth the first or second year, but none showed it for two consecutive years. Aside from the professional and academic rewards, I have a vision in my mind of little kindergartners and first graders happily chattering away in English, in addition to their home language. I recall the day in my second year as state

trustee when a crowd of parents gathered at the district one morning to greet me. Not knowing what the issue was, I had them escorted to the boardroom, where I braced myself for their anticipated concern. One of the parents, all of whom spoke only Spanish and the majority of whom were migrant workers, came up to the front of the boardroom and took my hand. She said the parents wanted to thank me for seeing that their children learned English. Her words: “Thank you, Dr. Franco. You see that our children learn English in school, and we will teach them Spanish at home.” I thought, *I have realized what I came here to do*. Would I do it again? Absolutely, yes, *for the children*.

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- Describe the moral imperative that drove the author’s work in this case story.

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- Identify key strategies the author implemented in the case story.

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- What other strategies might have been implemented?

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- Consider the leader's role in taking risks on behalf of students in the face of obvious staff, community, or even elected official disagreement. How much risk is too much? What consequences should the leader consider?

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- Based on your professional experiences, cite similar examples of students being denied an equitable education. What risks are you personally willing to take to make a difference in students' lives?

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