To be the vital community assets that our communities and society so desperately need, the new schools must approach teaching and learning differently. They must prepare their students by cultivating their talents and nurturing their imaginations. They must treat teachers as intellectual workers and provide them with the support they need to be effective. They must respect the parents they serve as genuine partners and collaborators, regardless of how much money they earn, how much education they have, or the language they speak. (Noguera, 2012, xvi)

This book is the result of collaboration between a school principal (Raymond Isola) and an educational researcher (Jim Cummins). We document how one school successfully implemented evidence-based instruction to transform the learning experiences of students from low-income, linguistically diverse communities. The school was by no means new, but it underwent a dramatic renewal by implementing important changes as described by educational researcher and activist Pedro Noguera.

Our collaboration draws on more than 20 years of engagement and discussion with each other concerning issues of educational equity. In 1997–1998, as part of his doctoral studies at the University of San Francisco, Raymond spent 6 months at the University of Toronto exploring issues of educational leadership, bilingual education, and students’ development of English for academic purposes. During this 6-month period, we (Raymond and Jim) spent many hours discussing the connections between Raymond’s experience as a bilingual teacher and school principal in California and the empirical and theoretical basis for educating bilingual students that Jim had written about. These conversations continued after Raymond became principal of Sanchez School in San Francisco’s Mission District. Jim visited the school on numerous occasions to observe classrooms and interact with teachers, parents, and community members. We made great efforts to link the initiatives undertaken in the school to the broader set of research findings relating to educational effectiveness for students from diverse backgrounds. We also set out to understand and document the many processes that interact to influence learning and create positive results for students and community members.
This book encapsulates the essence of these conversations and also reflects the input of many teachers, parents, and community members over the 13-year period it covers. Several chapters have been co-written with teachers, university collaborators, and partners in community organizations.* Thus, the perspectives articulated in the book draw from the shared experiences of many educators and community members who were instrumental in shaping the school improvement initiatives we describe.

In narrating the story of Sanchez School, we join many other educational researchers (e.g., Blankstein & Noguera, 2016; Boykin & Noguera, 2011; Carter & Welner, 2013) in locating the source of educational underachievement in the opportunity gaps experienced by low-income, socially marginalized students, many of whom come from linguistically and culturally diverse communities. These opportunity gaps include social conditions, such as segregated and unsafe housing, inadequate access to health care and nutrition, and poverty, which reduces parents’ ability to provide access to books and other cultural resources. Opportunity gaps also derive from educational conditions, such as lack of access to early childhood education, attendance at under-resourced schools staffed by inexperienced teachers, and instructional approaches focused on preparing students to take high-stakes standardized tests rather than engaging them in intellectual inquiry and critical thinking.

The story of Sanchez School is a story of educators, working closely with parents and community members, who chose to implement school-based policies designed to activate students’ talents and intellectual power within the classroom. Their choice to “approach teaching and learning differently” (in Noguera’s words) was also a choice to resist certain federal, state, and local policy mandates that they saw as misguided and counterproductive for their students. These educators made identity choices about their roles as educators, and they saw their roles in social and educational terms. Socially, their instruction challenged power relations that continue to generate inequality and exclusion; educationally, they focused on expanding minds, creating opportunity, and shaping lives.

Continuous improvement in classroom instruction requires a leadership process that is clear, collaborative, and evidence based. In contrast

* Where author names are not specified in a footnote on the first page of a chapter, the chapter authors are Raymond Isola and Jim Cummins. First person (“I”) refers to Raymond Isola.
to popular conceptions of the strong leader who exercises top-down “my way or the doorway” power, effective leaders can create conditions in which team members take on increasing responsibility and self-management in pursuit of shared organizational goals. In Sanchez School, as we pursued our “turnaround” goals, leadership became increasingly distributed across all the stakeholders in the organization—teachers, paraprofessionals, nonteaching staff, students, parents, and community members. Leadership was not a quality that resided in the person of the principal to be exercised in hierarchical and authoritarian fashion. Rather, leadership meant that the principal took the initiative to communicate a collective mandate clearly and to encourage dialogue about how we might pursue this mandate. This dialogue was authoritative insofar as it was informed by research, which we discussed and interpreted in the context of what it meant for Sanchez School. The shared leadership structures and processes that we put in place at Sanchez enabled the collective talents and energy of educators and other stakeholders to be mobilized in powerful ways that fueled students’ academic growth.

This book does not present a prescriptive set of guidelines for managing and transforming struggling schools. Our goal is rather to open up dialogue for administrators and school staff to reflect on school improvement strategies that are appropriate and feasible in their own specific contexts. This dialogue should take into account both relevant research and the experiences of schools such as Sanchez that have gone through this process. The general principles for shared leadership, equity, and evidence that we have identified on the basis of the Sanchez experience will find expression in different and equally creative ways depending on the specific choices made by educators in different contexts. As we elaborate throughout the book, pedagogical and organizational choices reflect but also define the individual and collective identities of educators in schools across the country. By the same token, educator identities influence the kinds of learning environments that students experience in classrooms and in the school as a whole. For example, teachers who see their roles as teaching the whole child and connecting curriculum with students’ lives are likely to view students’ home languages as personal, cognitive, and educational assets. When they welcome these languages into their classrooms, they simultaneously affirm students’ linguistic and cultural identities. By contrast, teachers who define their roles as simply transmitting the curriculum are much less likely to explore opportunities for affirming students’ identities by connecting curriculum to stu-
dents’ lives and experiences. In the chapters that follow, we illustrate the ways in which school leaders can work with school staff and community members to design learning spaces that foster powerful forms of identity negotiation between teachers and students.