Creating Equitable Learning Environments: An Equity Literacy Approach

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Equity Awareness Quiz

QUIZ
A majority of people experiencing poverty in the U.S. live in:
- urban areas
- suburban areas
- rural areas

QUIZ
How often is a child born into poverty in the United States?
- Every 32 seconds
- Every 3 minutes, 2 seconds
- Every 32 minutes

QUIZ
How often is a child born into poverty in the United States?
- Every 32 seconds
According to a series of studies, at what age do children start to notice racism and class status differences?

- 14
- 10
- 6
- 2

A Princeton study of elite universities found that legacy applicants—people, usually white and wealthy, with a parent or grandparent who attended the institution—are far more privileged by legacy status than applicants of color are by affirmative action policies. The study determined that legacy status was equivalent to how much of a boost to an applicant’s SAT score?

- 20 points
- 90 points
- 160 points

“We have deluded ourselves into believing the myth that capitalism grew and prospered out of the Protestant ethic of hard work and sacrifices. Capitalism was built on the exploitation of black slaves and continues to thrive on the exploitation of the poor, both black and white, both here and abroad.”

- Bernie Sanders
- Michael Moore
- Martin Luther King, Jr.
QUIZ
According to a study sponsored by the Pew Research Center, the median wealth of white households in the U.S. is how many times larger than that of African American households?
• 2 times
• 8 times
• 15 times

QUIZ
According to the National Coalition for the Homeless, what proportion of homeless men in the U.S. are military veterans?
• Two in ten
• Four in ten
• Six in ten

QUIZ
The three richest people in the world have as much wealth as:
• the 8 poorest countries
• the 48 poorest countries
• the 308 poorest countries
OUR OBJECTIVE

What are the knowledge and skills I need to become a threat to the existence of inequity in my spheres of influence?

Do I have the will to be that threat?

It's a lens, not just a list of practical actions.

Where We're Going

1. Introductory Blabber (in progress)
2. High-stakes standardized quiz (done)
3. A bit of sharing
4. The Equity Frame
5. What We Can Do
6. Discussion

EDUCATORS = CHANGEMAKERS (NOBODY CAN DO IT BETTER)

A BIT ABOUT MY WORK

• Largely focused on equity practice in educational institutions
• Gaps between philosophy and practice
• Gaps between “best practice” and actual practice
• Common “pitfalls” (or how schools operationalize “diversity” in ways that create more inequity)

Starting Assumptions

• All students deserve access to the best possible education we can provide for them, regardless of race, class, gender, and so on

Starting Assumptions

• A combination of bias and inequity means that this access is not equally distributed to all students
Starting Assumptions

• Everybody in the room has good intentions and the power to help change this reality, but good intentions are not enough

Starting Assumptions

• We don’t have the power to change everything, but we have the power to change some things

Reflections:

• What is one thing your school does well when it comes to creating equitable learning environments?

• What is one thing your school could do better?

• What are the challenges that keep you from doing better right now?

Reflecting on the Challenges

>A Few Observations<

Challenges I’ve Observed in Independent Schools

• Lack of *visual and vocal* leadership

• Tendency to pass the “equity” responsibility to somebody with less power, then to not support that person when they want to do real equity work

Challenges I’ve Observed in Independent Schools

• “Equity specialist” consumed with doing cultural work, not equity work

• Running cultural celebrations, advising cultural groups
### Challenges I've Observed in Independent Schools

- Presumption that being “caring” and/or “liberal” is the same as being equitable

- Lack of institutional and individual understanding leading to an inability or unwillingness to see and respond to bias and inequity

### Challenges I've Observed in Independent Schools

- Marginalization of the loudest and most insistent equity voices

- Often harder to be an outspoken advocate for equity than a quiet bigot

### Challenges I've Observed in Independent Schools

- Educational opportunities attached to fees and, as a result, attached to affordability

- How is that equitable?

### Challenges I've Observed in Independent Schools

- Putting all the equity eggs into the “recruitment and retention” basket

- Best recruitment and retention strategy: eliminate the inequity and bias

- NOTE: adding more people of color in and of itself does not eliminate racial inequity or bias

### BIRTH OF EQUITY LITERACY

The focus group and the diversity tie: Advantaged view vs. disadvantaged view

The problem with the problem—harder to change ideology than practice, but no real way to change practice without changing ideology
BIRTH OF EQUITY LITERACY

Diverse Friends Day

Is “cultural diversity” is for white people?

BIRTH OF EQUITY LITERACY

Country Posters Display

“I don’t see them as stereotypes, I see them as developmental.”

THE CULT OF CULTURE

cultural competence
cultural proficiency
intercultural education
intercultural communication
multicultural education
cultural relevance
cultural responsiveness
culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD)

AN ILLUSTRATION

Moyer & Clymer (2009), two school administrators write about cultural proficiency.

• They (1) name the issue of racism in schools, and then
• They (2) offer solutions that have nothing to do with racism: “a multicultural fair that featured music, dance, food, and customs and traditions representing different cultures…” (p. 16)

THE WORST KIND OF TROUBLE

The problem is NOT:

-A lack of people who value “diversity”
-A lack of “multicultural” curricula
-A lack of well-intentioned educators
-A lack of practical strategies and programs and initiatives for educational equity

THE WORST KIND OF TROUBLE

The trouble, because of ideological failings:

*It is easier in most schools to be a teacher who is unresponsive to racism than it is to be a teacher who is responsive to racism.*
“I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro’s great stumbling block in the stride toward freedom is not the ... Ku Klux Klanner but the white moderate who is more devoted to order than to justice.”

Our First Task: 
Building Our Equity Literacy

>Concepts and Distinctions<

EQUITY LITERACY

Four Abilities
1. Ability to recognize inequity
2. Ability to respond to inequity
3. Ability to redress inequity
4. Ability to sustain equity

WHAT IS EQUITY?

Inequity is unequal distribution of access and opportunity, including access and opportunity to material and non-material resources

So Equity requires a redistribution—not a mitigation, not an add-on program, but a structural redistribution of access and opportunity

SO...

Inequity + celebrating diversity + multicultural curricula + cultural competence = Inequity (at least in the immediate term)

We make our “diversity” efforts more meaningful if we attend first and foremost to matters of equity and justice
**IMPORTANT CONCEPTS**

1. Diversity ideologies
2. Interest convergence
3. Mitigative & Transformative Action

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**WHY IDEOLOGY IS FIRST CRITICAL FOCUS**

**Fact**

A study by the Department of Education found that Black students were disciplined at far higher rates than white students.

If found that Black students were much more likely to be suspended or expelled.

Our Question: Why?

Deficit → Structural (Ideology, Interpretation, Solution)

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**EQUITY IDEOLOGIES**

**Deficit ideology**

- look down the power continuum
- ignore structural barriers
- fix marginalized people
- best way to foster distrust among marginalized students and families
- Examples?

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**EQUITY IDEOLOGIES**

**Grit Ideology**

- a form of deficit ideology
- recognize structural barriers, but focus on building resiliency so marginalized communities can “overcome” barriers
- bill on sexual assault in schools (Ex)
- Other examples?

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**EQUITY IDEOLOGIES**

**Structural Ideology**

- removing structural barriers

**TRUTH:** There’s no other way to do this. If we’re stuck at the deficit or grit view, we cannot create equity because we are not responding to inequity.

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**INTEREST CONVERGENCE THEORY**

**The theory:** White people and white-dominated organizations invest in racial justice to the extent it benefits them to do so.

The implication: When we move beyond celebrating diversity and toward the redistribution of opportunity, most white people disengage and most white-dominated organizations retract their commitments.
MITIGATIVE/TRANSFORMATIVE

- Starfish story
- Babies in the river story

The critical shift from mitigating to eliminating inequity. We cannot mitigate our way to equity. We cannot multicultural arts fair our way to racial justice in schools.

Learning to See

1. Policies that punish marginalized students for symptoms of their marginalization
2. Practices that humiliate marginalized students or families (school activities that cost extra $)
3. “Diversity” programs or curricular that force marginalized students to “teach” about their experiences with no guarantee of their marginalization being addressed

→ Free Write: One example of each you have observed.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR LEADERS

Our first step is examining our own beliefs. Beliefs guide interpretations, interpretations guide actions.

Step One: Nature of bias and prejudice

- In-group favor
- Selective evidence-gathering

Step One: Quick example

Fact: Lower-income families might show up less often than other families for in-school opportunities for family engagement

The question: Why? How is this fact interpreted?

Once we interpret correctly, we can respond correctly.
Step Two: Recognize and respond to implicit and explicit biases

Examples:
1. Compliments
2. Informal interaction

School-Level

What We Can Do: Best Practices in Equity Education

(Which turn out, oddly, to be best practices in general...)

Examine All Learning Materials for Bias

Integrate “Diversity”

- Students respond better when it is woven into the curriculum and culture rather than introduced as a supplement or add-on during a special month or celebration

Learn to Pronounce Every Student’s Full Given Name Properly

- People who are marginalized often don’t feel empowered to share feedback
### Reach Out to Families Early and Often

- Marginalized families tend to hear from school only when something is wrong, creating an adversarial or negative relationship with the school.

### Be Thoughtful with Technology

- Careful about homework
- Careful about how we get information to families

### Family Involvement

- Make sure opportunities for family involvement are accessible to all families.

### Equitable Policy

- Make sure classroom and school policies don’t punish people for ways they are marginalized
  - Ex: attendance policies

### Address Policy

Identify and eliminate policies, programs, and initiatives that punish students for ways they already are marginalized

- How we weigh homework in grades
- How we respond to tardies and absences
- How we raise money (selling stuff)
- The Book Fair example

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**Leadership Commitments**

An Equity Literacy Approach to School Leadership
Universalize Equity

Wrap a commitment to equity into every policy, practice, and decision-making process
• Give equity experts power to advise you if you don’t have the expertise to do this

Hire People with Equity Literacy

A question for the interview:
• Why on average do African American students not do as well in school as White students?

Offer PD for Equity Literacy

Focus diversity-related PD on building the equity literacy skills and directly confronting inequity
• Not on cultural competence
• Not on appreciating difference
• Not on learning styles

Differentiate PD

Move forward with the people ready to move forward instead of repeating Diversity 101 over and over and...

Embrace a Proven Framework and Stick with It

PD is more effective when you pick an effective approach and build on it. It is not effective to bring in people with a bunch of different frameworks who use different language and who don’t build on one another’s work.

Review All Policy for Subtle Bias and Inequity

First you have to know how to see it – this is where a good equity specialist helps.
Make Sure Equity Specialist is an Equity Specialist

Have the humility to identify an advisor or team of advisors who are going to challenge you and who have the expertise to challenge you. Expertise in "cultural competence" or "diversity and inclusion" is not necessarily the same as expertise on equity.

Be Visible and Equity-Centric

As leaders, we need to set the institutional stage. We have to set the expectations and hold people accountable to them. The loudest equity voice in the building should be your voice.

Publicly Support Equity Advocates

Best sign of shift in institutional culture is when the equity advocates are in the center of the culture and the resisters are on the margins of the culture. Publicly support the efforts of the advocates. Praise them. Build the institutional culture around them.

Eliminate Extra Fees

Even if you have a pot of money for students who need it, it’s humiliating for them or their parents to keep asking for it. Eliminate in policy or practice that requires divvies up educational experiences based on who can afford extra fees.

Four Final Equity Literacy Questions

Question One: Who or what are we trying to fix?

Question: Are our equity efforts focused on fixing marginalized people or on fixing the *inequitable conditions that marginalize people*?

Answer: If it’s the former, start over.
Question Two:
Do we mitigate or transform?

Question:
Are our equity efforts a threat to the existence of inequity or do they merely mitigate the symptoms of inequity? (Ex: recruitment and retention efforts)

Answer:
If it’s the latter, start over.

Question Three:
Are we dancing around or digging in?

Question:
Are our equity efforts contributing to the permanent redistribution of access and opportunity or leaving the current distribution in place and helping marginalized people be more comfortable as marginalized people?

Answer:
If it’s the latter, start over.

Question Four:
Who are the experts?

Question:
Are our equity efforts based on collaborations with marginalized people, deferring to their expertise? Are we working “on” marginalized people or “with” marginalized people?

Answer:
If it’s the former, start over.

Thank you.

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