



Equity Dispatch

Leadership Practices for
Transformative Change
Towards Equity



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August 2016



"To be an educator is to be an expert at successfully teaching children--any and all children, not just some children"

-Scheurich & Skrla, 2003, p. 23



Did You Know

Transformative Change Towards Equity
Requires Strong, Multi-Directional Leadership

As educators across the nation ready their schools and classrooms to welcome a new year, there will undoubtedly be renewed pledges to ensure that all students experience high-quality opportunities to learn and succeed. Yet, no single person can assume the responsibility of realizing such a lofty promise. Indeed, achieving such a vision requires strong, intentional leadership at every level of the learning community— from the central office to school principals, classroom teachers to students, bus drivers to parents/caregivers. Moreover, such a promise cannot be achieved without intentional and concerted efforts focused explicitly on realizing [educational equity](#) (Fraser, 1998, 2008; GLEC, 2011).

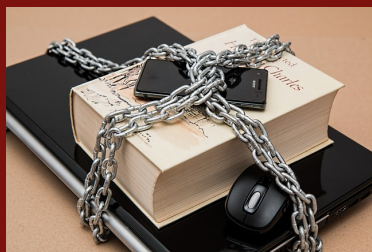
Transformative change toward equity requires reciprocal, focused leadership from the top-down, bottom-up, and inside-out. Transformative change towards equity can be characterized as “persistent systemic change that disrupts and dismantles historical legacies of normative assumptions, beliefs, and practices about individual characteristics and cultural identities that marginalize and disenfranchise people and groups of people” (GLEC, 2011). Leadership that brings about transformative change towards equity must inspire permanent, positive changes in both individuals and systems to create the conditions for and mobilize efforts toward equity. Educational equity does not happen by chance. Even when equity is the focus of change efforts, the nested nature of our educational systems surface many avenues of frustration (Kozleski & Artiles, 2012; Waitoller & Kozleski, 2013a).

Although leadership at every level of an educational system is necessary to realize more equitable schools, state, district and building leaders have a unique and significant role to play. Administrative leaders hold positions of substantial power in schools by providing direction, setting priorities and tone, and allocating resources to ensure priorities are accomplished. If administrative leaders do not value equity or believe deeply that all children can learn and succeed at high levels, how long before the flame of hope is extinguished in their staff and, more importantly, the children in their schools? Therefore, it is paramount that leadership at every level in our educational organizations demonstrate a resolute commitment to practices that nurture educational equity.

The responsibility for achieving the shared vision and promise of providing a free, high-quality education to every child does not rest upon administrators alone. Building and classroom educators (including school staff and personnel) are also crucial. Schools are complex social systems with cultures unto themselves (Engeström, 2004; Engeström, Miettinen, & Punamäki, 1999; Waitoller & Kozleski, 2013a & b). Within the complex ecology of schools exists a myriad of personal cultural identities, practices, beliefs and values (Engeström, 2004; Engeström, Miettinen, & Punamäki, 1999; Waitoller & Kozleski, 2013a & b). Therefore, both administrators and educators broadly in the school community must align in leadership practices to support an equity vision.

Finally, parents/caregivers and students are typically positioned as the recipients

of educational “goods and services”. Yet, [parents/caregivers and students bring rich assets, skills, social capital](#) etc. to school communities (González, Moll, and Amanti, 2005; Harry, Rueda, Kalyanpur, 1999). Parents and caregivers play a critical role in keeping a vigilant watch over schools, and in levying both grievances and commendations. They are key partners in their children’s educational experiences, and change agents in their communities. Students are emerging leaders and change agents in their own right. Equity efforts must include these stakeholders as meaningful participants and leaders if they are to be successful (NEA, 2011; Thorius, Rodriguez, & Bal, 2013). Yet, we know that it is often only certain parents/caregivers and students who occupy positions of leadership and power in schools (Harry, Rueda, Kalyanpur, 1999). Thus, school leaders must be vigilant in forging authentic partnerships that empower all parents/caregivers and students to participate meaningfully in the change process.



Why It Matters

Without Equity-Oriented Leadership, Schools Fail Children

If educational equity is the goal, let us first define it. Educational equity is when educational policies, practices, interactions, and resources, are representative of, constructed by, and responsive to all people such that each individual has access to, can meaningfully participate, and make progress in high-quality learning experiences that empower them towards self-determination and reduces disparities in outcomes regardless of individual characteristics and cultural identities (Fraser, 1998, 2008; GLEC, 2011). The core constructs embedded in this definition are: access, representation, meaningful participation, and highly positive outcomes ([learn more here](#)).

For decades, the US education system has grappled with an inequitable education system. Most notably, persistent race-based “achievement” gaps dating back to the inception of desegregation in public schools (see the “Coleman Report”, 1967), have dominated education discourse, stimulated ongoing debates, and have been the object of education reform initiatives for decades. With such focus why have we not seen more momentous closures, or even an elimination of race-based gaps? We posit that it is because reform efforts focus on technical solutions to “fix” the outcome of student performance, rather than centering the historical and contemporary social, cultural, and political contexts that have created and sustained systemic inequities (i.e., root causes) (Kozleski & Artiles, 2012; Mulligan & Kozleski, 2009). Furthermore, the field is dominated by expert-novice, top-down models of leadership that undervalue shared

governance, distributed leadership, and inclusive collaboration necessary for complex systems change (Xiaohu & Thousand, Nevin, & Malgieri, 1996).

If we are to realize advances toward equity, educators must make significant shifts in their praxis (Gutiérrez & Vossoughi, 2010). One of the most important shifts is recognizing that learning is a culturally mediated, social process rather than a “culturally neutral,” individual cognitive process, i.e., the cultural nature of learning (Artiles, 2003; Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003; Rogoff, 2003). The cultural nature of learning describes schools and learning environments as having three cultural spheres: (1) the personal cultural histories and repertoire that people (e.g., students, educators, staff etc.) bring with them into the learning environment; (2) the routinized cultures that already exist and persist in the learning environment (e.g., “the way things are done around here”); and (3) the new cultures that people create together in the learning environment. The cultural practices in those three spheres may or may not be in harmony with one another, and therein “lies the rub”. It is in that space — where differences in cultural practices and ways of being intersect and inequities often occur (Gallego & Cole, 2001; Artiles, 2003; Kozleski & Artiles, 2012). If left unattended, it is in that space that unconscious biases and stereotypes may be activated and affect assumptions about people and communities, resulting in discriminatory treatment and restricted access to quality learning opportunities.

The next key shift in praxis is that educators must openly acknowledge, appreciate, and accept differences as positive and valuable (Garcia, 2008; González, Moll, and Amanti, 2005). In her famous quote, Audre Lorde (1986) invites us to reimagine how we position difference stating, “It is not our differences that divide us. It is our inability to recognize, accept, and celebrate those differences.” A serious commitment to appreciating difference means moving beyond superficial diversity celebrations (e.g., [diversity days](#) or [taco nights](#)), to meaningfully integrating diverse lived experiences into the learning environment every day (Nieto, 1992). Moreover, those lived experiences and personal identities should be reflective of the students in the learning environment (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 2014). For example, Muslim girls should see affirming examples of their cultural practices in the examples used in instruction, in reading materials, and as part of classroom dialogue. Appreciating difference means regarding the varied experiences, beliefs, physical bodies, and ways of being and knowing that students and families bring to the learning environment as strengths and assets.

The third and final key shift in praxis is turning the focus of improvement efforts away from blaming and “fixing” students and communities, toward addressing systemic failures. In other words, examining and interrogating the question, “What is it about our educational system, the people, policies, and practices, that is resulting in inequities?” Often the problem space is defined as being inherent to students and/or their circumstances, e.g., “That student comes from poverty, we can’t do anything about that,” to which technical solutions are applied. This third shift invites educators again to examine if they truly believe that all children, that is

every, single child, can and will achieve to high levels if given opportunities to do so (Scheurich & Skrla, 2003). And, if so, puts the onus on educators to engage in ongoing inquiry about their own practice and systems to create the opportunities that nurture and draw out each child's capacity to succeed. Equity-oriented leadership practices enable critical reflection and empower adults and students within the learning community to address uncovered inequities that serve as barriers to student success.



For Equity Now

Engage in Foundational Equity-Oriented Leadership Practices

Cultivating Critical Consciousness

Becoming a transformative equity-oriented leader begins by looking inward toward one's own beliefs, attitudes, and practices. More specifically, leaders focused on creating equitable learning opportunities for historically marginalized students by routinely examining how their own beliefs, practices and actions may marginalize and/or harm students, otherwise known as demonstrating critical consciousness. Extending the work of Paulo Freire (1996), Radd and Kramer (2016) define critical consciousness as, "...the willingness and ability to see how power and privilege are at work to systematically advantage some while simultaneously disadvantaging others" (p. 584). The following practices will support leaders in cultivating critical consciousness:

Develop Critical Self-Awareness and Examination: Recognize and become aware of your own [multiple, social identities](#) and the ways those identities interact to shape your sense of self (Goodman, 2013). We all have multiple identities that intersect and situate us with our social settings (Crenshaw, 1989). Explore how your identities inform your interpretations of experiences and understandings of complex social issues (Mitchell, 2015).

Build Awareness of Implicit Bias: "Implicit bias refers to the attitudes or stereotypes that affect our understanding, actions, and decisions in an unconscious manner. These biases, which encompass both favorable and unfavorable assessments, are activated involuntarily and without an individual's awareness or intentional control." (Blair, 2002 and Rudman, 2004, as cited in Staats, 2015, p. 62).

Everyone possesses implicit biases. [Become aware of the biases](#) that affect your understanding, actions, and decisions in an unconscious manner. Explore common attitudes and stereotypes you may hold and about which you are unaware.

Understand Issues of Privilege and Power: Privilege can be described as unearned

advantages or benefits that "...exists when one group has something that is systematically denied to others...because of the social category they belong to." (Johnson, 2006, p.126). Peggy McIntosh (1988) describes two different aspects of privilege: one is the notion of "unearned entitlements", and the other is "conferred dominance." Thus, positions of privilege go beyond providing benefits to those who hold them, but also confer dominance [or power] over others, and can be thought of as the inverse of oppression (Johnson, 2006; McIntosh, 1988, 1990).

We all have identities that confer privileges, and concurrently power, and other identities that result in experiencing oppressions. To dismantle systems of privilege and power, leaders must first become aware of and make visible the [different kinds of privilege](#) that are at work in our educational systems (e.g., White skin, male, or heterosexual), and the [ways in which those locations of privilege confer power, dominance, and oppressions](#) for staff, students and parents/caregivers. Then, leaders can begin to identify, acknowledge, and address issues of power and privilege in their own systems.

Commitment to Critical Language Awareness

As educational leaders develop and nurture critical consciousness, feelings of blame and responsibility may emerge. However, it is important to remember that systemic transformation is about collective, collaborative action to change organizations and systems (Johnson, 2006). Leaders who are ready to take action can begin by engaging in critical language awareness practices to disrupt marginalizing discourse and advance transformation towards equity in their educational systems.

In their book, *The Power of Talk*, Briscoe, Arriaza, and Henze (2009) discuss the importance of understanding of how language in written, physical, oral, and digital forms can silence, marginalize or oppress people with less power. Johnson (2006) reminds us that, "Reclaiming language takes us directly to the core reality that the problem is privilege and the power that maintains it" (p. 126). Leaders can use the following three step process, and embedded tools, to deliberately reshape language use in their learning communities.

- **Discern**: Recognize if and why language is problematic. [A Progressive's Style Guide](#) (Thomas & Hirsch, 2016) will support leaders in understanding the historical, political, and social contexts for why particular language is problematic.
- **Decide**: What approaches and supports can be used to interrupt the use of marginalizing language? Leaders should consider things like the time, context, and appropriateness of methods for disrupting and redirecting, but attentive action should always be taken.
- **Disrupt**: Implement a thoughtful, relevant, and responsive approach to disrupt oppressive language practices. The [Observe-Thought-Feeling-Desire framework](#) from SuperCamp is one communication tool to use when disrupting oppressive language.

The critical practices above provide a few foundational steps leaders can take toward realizing equitable systems. The need for transformation toward equitable education systems is great, but the change process can begin at any moment with a single committed leader. Each and every educator has agency and opportunity to stimulate meaningful changes toward equity!

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