

## Equity: Buzzword or Bold Commitment to School Transformation

By Deirdre Williams, EdD and Kelly Brown, EdD

As school leaders focus on equity to ensure every child succeeds, it is imperative they understand and value the current demographic reality of the students in the communities in which they serve. The National Center for Education Statistics (2009) indicates that “students of color, described as Latina/o, African American or Asian, are now the majority of students in K-12 public schools in the United States” (Taylor, Kumi-Yeboah, & Ringlaben, 2016, p. 42). Our schools are increasingly seeing a trend of students with backgrounds identified as ethnically, linguistically, culturally, and otherwise socially diverse while over 80 percent of the leadership and teacher force who serves them is predominately White and monolingual (Taylor et al., 2016; Khan, Lindstrom, & Murray, 2014; U.S. Department of Education, 2016).

These cultural and linguistic differences between our educator and student populations can influence the overall student academic achievement in our schools, arguably due to the lack of cultural knowledge, sensitivity, and competence to meet the needs of all students (Khan et al., 2014). If our goal is to achieve equity and obtain comparably high academic achievement among all the

students we serve, we must begin to awaken our mindsets to the influence culture has on our bias, assumptions, beliefs, and ultimately our practices in schools.

In the days of A-F accountability systems educators are hard pressed to implement the best program to quickly raise student academic achievement. This common practice of school reform has consistently given the same results—minimal academic improvement that is not sustainable. What if our goals to achieve equity in schools begins to focus more on people and less on programs? Specifically, what if we focused on everyone in our schools at the individual level taking the time to surface not just their knowledge of content, pedagogy, or leadership, but their biases, stereotypes, and belief systems? Are we as educators willing to consider that perhaps we have had this school reform concept all wrong? It has been argued that organizations do not change, the individuals in the organizations change (Fullan, 1993). If that is truly the case, then school transformation towards equity is in fact individual transformation towards equity.

A different approach to school transformation towards equity

allows individuals in schools to build their cultural capacity and cement their new orientations to diversity to an asset-based belief about students as opposed to the prevailing deficit-based perceptions typically present in schools. With a rebuilding of mindsets towards equity consciousness all decisions in schools will be made through an equity lens. Equity begins to become the plan that curriculum, data, professional development revolve around. There is power in educators knowing how their culture, values, ethnicity and upbringing affect their worldview. This knowledge requires deep reflection to understand the subconscious impetus that dictates their worldview. Such thinking also creates educators who realize their “truth” is based on experiences often dramatically different from others. Understanding of one’s worldview is solely based on the social interactions with others. “More importantly, others may experience the same world and come to a very different conclusion is the very beginning of creating cultural sensitivity and competence towards other cultures” (Brown, 2016).

Leaders who hope to achieve transformation towards equity in their schools by focusing on the transformation of mindsets of

themselves and their staff should consider the following principles.

**1. Reflective discourse pushes the individual to discover why their**

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**beliefs about self and others exist.**

Educators focused on social justice understand the context of how education directly relates to how we currently teach children in America. History cannot be denied that “from the beginning, schools in the United States were designed to benefit and affirm the values and culture of the white people in power” (Routé Chatmon & Osta, 2018). Privilege and prejudices consciously and unconsciously affect our belief systems and how we interact with the children we serve. Through reflective discourse embedded in professional development, teachers can begin to understand their belief systems and the effects of those systems on our students. It is important to note, education and educators predominately come from a perspective of how the culture of current power dynamics shape policies and practices in schools. Leaders must serve as equity warriors and facilitate reflective conversations that help individuals to discover their beliefs and neutralize them, so we can view students’ abilities from an asset-based perspective.

**2. Reflection creates individuals who realize their “truth” is based on life experiences that are often**

**dramatically different from others.**

Schools can be characterized as a microcosm of the diversity, cultures, biases, and stereotypes seen in society. Addressing how the historical and political dynamics of culture, race, religion and economics play out in our classrooms is vital to ensuring leaders have a

qualified teaching force to level out the field for children. This process can only be done through honest and deep reflection that is both internally driven and externally guided through teacher and leader dialogue. Educators have to do the work to address their ‘truths’ and analyze how it may affect the dichotomy in the classroom. Reflective dialogue should serve as a bridge to help them to realize how their pedagogical and philosophical truths are creating barriers to the teaching and learning process for their diverse students.

**3. Professional learning experiences that encourage a change in practice place a premium on constructing individual meaning, honoring the prior experience of the individual, and valuing ideals central to social change.** There is no easy solution to the struggles students face in our school systems, but “equity leaders must concentrate on the present more than the future, look more toward the possible than the probable, and conduct safe-to-learn experiments to discover what might work” (Cary, 2016). Continuous professional learning has the ability to support equity mindsets by building multiple perspectives. Quality professional development can focus experiences that

highlight ideas devoted to school transformation, social change and honor individuals in the classroom. It will help to build professional habits that allow individuals to question assumptions and “enhance their performance and enable them to navigate the ‘not knowing’ while still setting a direction for the emergence of solutions to address their most challenging equity issues” (Cary, 2016). School leaders focused on systemic and sustainable change will play a vital role in developing and facilitating professional development in a way that is embedded in their daily professional learning communities.

**4. There are individuals who must see a direct benefit to changing their practice beyond the change being the morally and ethically right thing to do.** Therefore, leaders have to make plain the benefits equity will yield to both teachers and students. Culture and race “affect our access to opportunities, how we experience the world, and whether our identity is accepted or derided” (Routé Chatmon & Osta, 2018). It is not enough to focus on the moral and ethical argument towards equity, leaders must be explicit about the positive immediate and delayed benefits that school transformation towards equity will have on their schools, the communities in which their schools are situated, and society as a whole.

**5. While awareness of bias is necessary, this alone will not result in change in practice.** “Equity leadership is about being self-aware, self-correcting and self-directed and is vital in developing the transformational habits, skills and practices that demonstrate moral courage, independent judgment and bold action for leading in complex systems” (Cary,

2016). Awareness combined with the will and the skill to take action results in change. In order to fulfill the mission of ensuring each child has equal access and opportunity for academic success, equity-minded leaders should be courageous enough to think and act in ways that will realize radical change in their school community. Simply understanding there is a problem still supports the damaging and oppressive practices that happen daily. We must engage and influence others to change prevailing mindsets that influence oppressive practices.

Equity is increasingly becoming part of normal educational

conversation. There is, however, a gap between the words of educators and the eventual reality the word invokes. Our fear is it will become a sentiment without meaning if individuals are not putting in the work to understand and live all the word means. Our hope is that the increased discussion and focus on equity will begin to change the mindset and ultimately the behaviors of those that work with underserved

students. The leader can better conceptualize and create a roadmap to equity if the work to address the individual beliefs is prioritized in schools. When leaders serve as

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