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Five Practices for Equity-Focused School Leadership

Preface.................................................................................................................................. ix

Practice I Prioritizing Equity Leadership: Adopting a Transformative Approach....................... 1

Introduction.......................................................................................................................... 3

1. This Is So Hard! The Challenge and Urgency of Leading for Equity................. 9
2. The Stories We Tell About Why We Don’t Do Better........................................... 17

Practice II Preparing for Equity: The Ongoing Emotional and Intellectual Work of Equity Leadership .................. 33

3. Preparing to Learn for Equity: Key Concepts and Guiding Principles.............................................. 35
4. Exploring Identities: Race .......................................................................................... 57
5. Exploring Identities: Disability.................................................................................. 66
6. Exploring Identities: Socioeconomics .......................................................................... 76
7. Exploring Identities: Language................................................................................... 85
8. Exploring Identities: Sex, Gender Identity, and Sexual Identity .................................. 94
9. Exploring Identities: Religion...................................................................................... 104
PRACTICE III DEVELOPING EQUITY LEADERSHIP TEAMS: ESSENTIALS FOR LEADING TOWARD EQUITY TOGETHER .......... 115

10. Routines for Building Effective and Cohesive Equity Leadership Teams ................................................................. 117

11. Team Roles .................................................................................................................................................. 142

PRACTICE IV BUILDING EQUITY-FOCUSED SYSTEMS: IDENTIFYING NEEDS AND PLANNING SYSTEMIC CHANGE .......... 157

12. Conducting a Needs Assessment ...................................................................................................................... 159

13. Analyzing Data and Identifying Findings ........................................................................................................... 168


PRACTICE V SUSTAINING EQUITY: PREPARING FOR THE LONG HAUL 195

15. Looking Back and Planning Forward .................................................................................................................. 197

Conclusion: A Final Word ........................................................................................................................................ 208

Acknowledgments .................................................................................................................................................... 210

Appendix A: Sample Equity Audit ........................................................................................................................ 213

Appendix B: Tools for Environmental Scans ........................................................................................................ 219

References .............................................................................................................................................................. 229

Index ...................................................................................................................................................................... 236

About the Authors .................................................................................................................................................. 243
In early 2013, I called George (a mentor and friend since 2007), then Mark (whom I’d met and whose work I had followed), and then Gretchen (whom I knew of but had never met) and asked them to join me in thinking about the unique practice of school leadership that aims to make meaningful structural and systemic shifts toward educational equity. I will remain forever grateful to each of them for saying “yes” to the possibility of the four of us working together and, ultimately, for the ways they opened themselves and shared their experiences, energy, wisdom, investment, and hearts to envision how we might offer something of value. That they selected me as lead author of this book reflects only that I made the initial contacts; it does not reflect the true investment of time, knowledge, ideas, and words on the page that we collectively imparted. I am both honored and humbled to be in partnership with Gretchen, Mark, and George and forever changed by the process of, and learning from, our work and relationships together.

We began our four-person team first by talking about ideas and approaches to this type of leadership, and then began to discuss what form our collective work might take, eventually deciding to write a book—this book—together. Our sole purpose was to address an overwhelming need in the field for practical and effective resources and guidance to make systemic change that advances social justice in schools and school districts while building cohesive communities. We wanted to develop a book that would provide leaders with processes and tools to engage in the deeply disruptive nature of
equity change with thoughtful attention to fundamental human needs for connection, growth, and homeostasis.

Through our multiyear process of developing content and writing together, we witnessed national events that were changing our world: Ferguson; Philando Castile; the growing power of Black Lives Matter; the unprecedented election of President Donald Trump; the ushering in of the post-truth era; Brett Kavanaugh and the #MeToo movement; escalating climate change; sweeping and inhumane anti-immigrant actions; increasing awareness and acceptance of gender diversity; and the increasing levels of both activism and polarization aided and fueled by the evermore omnipresent role of the internet and social media in our lives. As of this writing, we are months past the initial stay-home orders in most states related to the Coronavirus, and the U.S. count has surpassed 15.2 million cases of infection, with more than 1.5 million deaths worldwide. These numbers, as well as any report on the economic impact of this crisis, will undoubtedly seem incredibly stunted by the time you read this. We cannot predict the lasting and unimaginable ways this global pandemic—or the political and social polarization that accompanies it in the United States—will change our world on every scale, including in schools and in our daily lives. By the time you read this, although you will have a better idea, the true impact will not be known for years.

Beyond the COVID-19 pandemic, we are witness to social unrest and uprising on the largest scale in decades, ignited by the slow and painful murder of George Floyd, held under the knee of a Minneapolis police officer for over nine minutes, and captured on videotape for the world to see, just a few miles from my home in Minneapolis.

We believe that whatever happens in the months and years ahead, and however our lives change, the processes and tools in this book will be useful for you. We wrote this book such that it could be practical and useful across contexts, and not rely on any particular set of assumptions about the way your school, district, or other educational setting might work, with the exception that yours is a human system, it is focused on learning, and it exists in a centuries-old context of racism, sexism, classism, and other forms of exclusion.

To that end, we know that the management literature and paradigms about how business leaders grow and create more profit through their companies and practices simply cannot be directly applied to schools that seek to serve all students, particularly as they exist in broader systems that structurally guarantee and necessitate inequality and inequity. Educational equity requires the examination and revision of tightly held beliefs about how schools are structured and operationalized, for what purpose,
and to what end. The strength of this book originates from the combined array of life, educational, and professional histories we each brought to our work together, as well as our experiences as practitioners, consultants, and professors. We hope it serves as an encouraging guide for you to address the challenge of bringing together individuals with diverse perspectives and life experiences to create an organization that truly fosters meaningful learning in every aspect of its environment.

We hope this book will help you and your team build the types of relationships that we have in our work together. Through our work, we increasingly engaged in open and honest conversations about race, gender, dis/ability, and other aspects of identity and, as a result, our collaboration has required courage, commitment, persistence, humility, compassion, and honesty. We have experienced countless moments as individuals of different races (Mark and Gretchen identify as Black; George and I identify as White) faced with the decision to withhold an opinion or perspective or to step into more honesty, openness, and curiosity. These challenges were complicated and exacerbated by the realities of power and privilege and lived experience that would caution against such honesty and risk. Through our persistent leaning in, we were astounded, not by the ongoing need to address race and racism in our work for social justice, but by our own need to continue learning and talking about race and racism across racialized identities. Gretchen and Mark were skillful and compassionate teachers, and George and I were grateful for new insights and learning but discouraged at times by the magnitude of our own knowledge gaps, despite now decades of targeted learning in attempts to know and understand. Gretchen shared with me on more than one occasion that it was critical that she witnessed George and I struggle and was witness to our subsequent actions as a result of our new learning. As she shared, “The everyday experience of working for justice, to create more equitable educational spaces, is often frustrating and isolating. It was important for me to know that despite knowledge gaps, not only are there White educators committed to and actually doing equity work, but some of us are dedicated to teaching other White educators how it can be done. It was important for me to see that you and George were not just allies in theory, but also in practice.” Throughout our teamwork, we developed an unspoken but very-much-alive commitment to hold one another with grace and compassion, while simultaneously (1) facing the stark and inhumane realities of racism, sexism, able-ism, classism, and all other forms of exclusion, discrimination, dehumanization, and violence; and (2) struggling through the complexities of systems of oppression and the challenges of intersectionality.
Equity leadership requires that kind of commitment, courage, and self-reflection from all of us. It requires us to imagine equitable spaces and ideas that we have not seen in practice. To do this, leaders require a bold vision, significant knowledge and skills, and collaboration with many people. This book takes leaders and teams through an engaged process that involves deep learning. It creates space for teams to step back from their day-to-day struggles to focus on the big picture, and then it moves them toward action for creating the schools our nation wants and needs. This book invites educational leaders to transform how they think and, ultimately, what they do as a result.

A key feature of this work and thus of this book is a scaffolded use of stories: our stories, the stories of our schools, the stories of communities, the stories we tell, and so on. This book employs our collective understanding that embedded within stories is the unique opportunity to reclaim and reimagine how things might be if we can use stories as impetus for self-reflection and growth, as well as to develop others (Bruner, 1990). As a result, this book provides many opportunities for you to name, reclaim, revise, and expand your equity stories and to place them alongside other stories. Throughout the book we offer a variety of activities designed to encourage you and your team to unearth and improve your equity lenses and leadership by naming, reflecting, and examining the narratives (stories, experiences, and perspectives) that shape your thinking. In the process, we believe that you will learn, as we did, that you are not alone. By engaging in this process together, you will strengthen yourselves as individual leaders and as a team that will be better able to design and lead change.

We are so excited that this book is here now and that you have chosen to pick it up and see what it holds! We believe you will find it useful, instructive, challenging, and affirming. Most importantly, we thank you for your commitment to, and work in, transforming systems to include and truly serve all students, their families, and their communities.

With hope and in leadership,

Sharon I. Radd

With my beloved friends and colleagues

Gretchen Givens Generett, Mark Anthony Gooden, and George Theoharis
PRACTICE I

Prioritizing Equity Leadership: Adopting a Transformative Approach
Introduction

Schools in the United States, while providing many great experiences and opportunities, are still grossly inequitable. Consider these facts:

- **School discipline disproportionately targets students of color, students with disabilities, and transgender students.** Black students are suspended or expelled at three times the rate of White students (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2014, 2016); they represent 16 percent of the student population, but up to 40 percent of students suspended and 27 percent of students referred to law enforcement. Students with disabilities are twice as likely to be suspended than their nondisabled peers. These statistics worsen for students of color with disabilities: Nearly 25 percent of boys of color with disabilities are suspended and approximately 20 percent of girls of color with disabilities receive suspension, compared to 6 percent of students without disabilities. Transgender students are twice as likely to be disciplined than their cisgender peers (Kosciw, Greytak, Palmer, & Boesen, 2014). Those who are suspended are less likely to graduate and more likely to enter the juvenile justice system than those who aren’t.

- **White and Asian students are twice as likely as their Black and Latino/a/x peers to attend high schools where the full range of math and science courses—Algebra I, geometry, Algebra II, calculus, biology, chemistry, physics—are available.** Further, Black and Latino/a/x students as well as students with disabilities and English
learners (ELs) are less likely to be in these classes even when they are offered.

- While students with disabilities represent 12 percent of the student enrollment, they make up 58 percent of students placed in seclusion or involuntary confinement and 75 percent of students who are physically restrained (U.S. DOE OCR, 2014, 2016). These students comprise 22 percent of students who are retained and only 2 percent of students in an AP class. More than 1.1 million students have minimal or no access to general education and limited inclusion with their peers; in many places, this disproportionately impacts students of color (U.S. DOE-OCR, 2016).

- English learners have graduation rates (Layton, 2014) at approximately 59 percent nationally, with some states graduating only 24 percent of their ELs. While making up approximately 5 percent of high school students, ELs represent 11 percent of students retained or held back, and 21 percent of ELs are chronically absent (U.S. DOE OCR, 2016).

- Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, and intersex (LGBTQIA+) students are targeted at alarming rates. Seventy-four percent are verbally harassed, 36 percent are physically harassed, and 17 percent are assaulted. While the majority of LGBTQIA+ students miss school and stay away from extracurricular events because they feel unsafe, most (57 percent) do not report it to school officials as they feel nothing will be done. They’re not off-base in their predictions: 62 percent of LGBTQIA+ students who did report harassment or assault to school authorities indicated that nothing was done (Kosciw et al., 2014).

- Since 9/11, Muslim and Arab students and their families have faced heightened concerns about harassment and being targeted. In 2014, more than 50 percent of Muslim students reported being insulted or abused because of their religion (Blad, 2016; Shah, 2011). Approximately 30 percent of girls who wore hijabs reported that their head coverings were inappropriately touched or pulled. Many have experienced teachers, principals, and fellow classmates profiling them as associated with terrorists.

We believe much can be done to change these circumstances, yet school leaders don’t always have the tools, knowledge, and resources to actually do so. We wrote this book because we wanted to offer an actionable framework that individual leaders and school, district, and interorganizational teams can use to address this need.
As an author team, we have experience as practicing preK–12 educators and administrators, preparing preK–12 educators and administrators, and as consultants supporting inservice preK–12 educators and administrators. We have connected with practitioners from across the United States and in other countries to understand the challenges and barriers—and also the opportunities for transformation—that exist in our educational systems. Over the span of our professional careers, we have seen hundreds of attempts at school reform. We have had the fortunate opportunity to participate in, study, and learn from these efforts. We have learned a lot about what works and what doesn’t. We want to share that with you!

We also want to share the diversity of perspectives from which this book is written: As an author team, we are a White woman (Sharon), a Black woman (Gretchen), a Black man (Mark), and a White man (George). We are each cisgender, straight, English-speaking, and currently nondisabled and financially secure. We share this information because we believe each aspect of a person’s identity is a space where inclusion or marginalization can occur, and that school leaders must seek to be anti-oppressive and committed to full inclusion across this wide spectrum of sociocultural identities. (We’ll discuss this in greater detail later in the book.)

That said, you will find that we begin with and center race as we think about educational equity. We do this for a couple of reasons. First, race is similar to other aspects of identity in that it is a social construction; the social construction of race results in profound inequality, and inequality related to this aspect of identity is persistent across history. On the other hand, race is unique in our society because we are deeply segregated based upon this identity. People receiving advantages related to having a White identity (i.e., people who identify as, or are identified as, White) are shielded from seeing or acknowledging their advantages. And, with a few exceptions, race is a fixed aspect of our identity, unlike some other aspects of our identities where we see segregation (e.g., socioeconomic class, religion).

Next, we recognize that this book will most likely be read and used by a majority White audience. While more than 50 percent of school children are of color (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020a), fewer than 20 percent of teachers (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020b), approximately 22 percent of principals (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020c), and 6 percent of superintendents (Kowalski, 2013) are of color. We wrote this book with that reality in mind.

1Throughout the book, we have elected to capitalize Black and White, based upon the use of these terms to refer to people in a racialized way. In order to reflect our anti-racist stance, we do not capitalize white supremacy/ists, white nationalism/ists, white privilege, white fragility, and whiteness.
Last, in our experience, we’ve found that racism is the most difficult form of inequality for educators to discuss and address. We begin with and center race in our approach because we believe that if you can understand and work on racism in schools, you can understand and work on inequality and inequity in many of its other forms.

Given all of this, we hope to help White educators and leaders become more comfortable thinking and talking about racism and, more importantly, skilled antiracist and anti-oppressive leaders. Further, we think this book is useful for educators and leaders of color as we guide you to examine all aspects of your identity and experiences through strengthening your antiracist and anti-oppressive approaches, and thinking systemically about equity-focused change.

Our framework outlines five meta-practices for building equity-focused systems as illustrated in Figure I.1. We refer to these as meta-practices for three reasons:

- Your professional work is a “practice,” and the meta-practices in this book are to be applied in that professional practice.
- We mean that these are literally practices, that you should rehearse and perform them repetitively and cyclically. As opposed to believing that “practice makes perfect,” we believe that practice builds new and needed habits and that your new habits will be necessary for effective and authentic equity leadership.
- Each meta-practice contains a robust set of practices for you to use in your professional work.

**FIGURE I.1**

*Five Practices for Building an Equity-Focused System*
The practices build on one another, so it is important that this book be read from beginning to end, in order, and in its entirety. Further, to make progress in your leadership, you will need to open yourself and your team to emotional and intellectual work. This work will be on yourselves, with each other, and in your schools/organizations. For example, to really learn from the book, you will need to engage with the content and consistently surface your thinking and reflect on your meaning-making, starting here and now, and continue to do so for the rest of your career. We have structured this book so it gives you the foundation, time, and space to do all these things both individually and together with your team, using written reflections, discussion prompts, and online resources. When it’s time to reflect in the book, we signal this with the words Pause and Reflect. We know it will be challenging, and at times uncomfortable, but taking the time to think deeply, and perhaps differently, is essential if you want to create more equity. When it’s time to try a new strategy or action, we signal that with the words Try This; to put your learning to use, look for the word Application. We do not pretend any of this is easy, nor does this book have all the answers. We offer ideas, strategies, and processes to engage you and your colleagues in the hard labor of working and leading toward equity. We know that although it will be challenging and at times uncomfortable, the promise of greater equity is worth it!

It’s important that you engage right from the start. Before you go any further, write your responses to the questions that follow.

**Pause and Reflect**

- How do you think of yourself in relation to equity leadership? What do you know? Feel? Experience?
- What are you thinking and how are you feeling as you begin this book and learning experience?
- The beginning of the book offers facts for your consideration. However, not everyone will take away the same meaning from these data. Before going further, what is your reaction to the facts presented? What do you think? How do you feel?
- How does your school’s current situation compare to the data? What have you learned in past experiences that influences how you see your school?
This Is So Hard!
The Challenge and Urgency of Leading for Equity

We know that schooling and education are powerful gateways to opportunity and quality of life. We know that hundreds of thousands of teachers and administrators give their blood, sweat, and tears to their students every day and have profound impact. We know that the spirit of universal public education is a spirit of equity and opportunity. Nonetheless, in the midst of this noble work and promise, we have gross inequity. This inequity must and can be changed.

This change requires a systemic and transformative approach. By systemic, we mean that the problem lies in the system and the inequities are symptoms and results. In other words, although inequity breeds inequity, it is not the cause but the result of a system that is set up to produce inequities. Therefore, system-based approaches are necessary to create equity. When we say transformative, we mean that you have to learn to think and act in some fundamentally different ways to change these historic patterns that are entrenched in the system. This section establishes the need for you, as a school leader, to make a firm and engaged commitment to prioritize equity leadership.

To begin, we illustrate some of the harder truths about how inequity lives, acts, and grows in schools. We visit Ezra in Meadowbrook to explore how systemic inequity
manifests. We then present the Levels of Systemic Equity to help you understand inequity as historic, structural, institutionalized, and interpersonal/individual, demonstrating why equity leadership must address systemic causes.

Over the past 10 years, the suburban community of Meadowbrook has transitioned from a farming community made up of mostly White, working class families to a more complex and densely populated exurb. It is now home to an elite gated golf-course community in the southeast corner of the city along the lakefront, as well as an increasing number of Section 8 housing developments in the more commercial areas of the city. New residents are drawn to the city because of the school system’s reputation for excellence and high achievement. At all income levels and across the variety of housing options, the city is becoming more racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse.

Ezra, a White male in his late 30s, has been the principal of Meadowbrook Middle School for eight years. Because the city’s 6th through 8th graders attend school there, it is a virtual microcosm of the city. In addition, Ezra’s shift from teacher to curriculum specialist to principal began during the implementation of No Child Left Behind, creating increased awareness of racial disparities in opportunity, resources, and achievement. As principal, he was tasked with leading his entire staff to “close the achievement gap” and create a welcoming and inclusive environment for all students.

Now, under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), Ezra continues to feel pressure to raise test scores and eliminate inequities in his building. Simultaneously, racial and ethnic tensions are increasing throughout the building related to events in the community. Specifically, the local mall management has been under fire related to anti-immigration rhetoric and graffiti that continues there, seemingly without intervention. In addition, the city council is debating policies and services related to the local library and their obligations toward patrons who are immigrants, refugees, or have insufficient financial resources.

Ezra is beginning to realize that all of these things are connected. Due to his long-standing commitment to all students, he has been working at equity for a long time. When trying to address the problems he’s facing, he’s been encouraged to reach for the nearest, most promising tool. It’s been tempting to look to new curricula or teaching strategies, especially those approaches that are “scientifically based” or “scientifically proven.” But, as Ezra has experienced, most schools can make some progress with these methods, but then they plateau or worse, regress.

**What Is Going On**

As you consider how to use your leadership to create equitable outcomes, we encourage you to also consider how the scope of systemic inequity spans historical, structural, institutional, and individual/interpersonal levels (see Figure 1.1).
**Historical**

When we say *historical*, we mean that the problems we face today have their roots in centuries of human experience. In Meadowbrook, many of the families buying homes in this fast-expanding community can trace their economic status back to the GI Bill, when their White grandfathers received federal assistance to attend college, participate in job training, start a new business, and buy a home following their military service in World War II. These benefits were disproportionately available to White male veterans but not necessarily African American or female veterans (Katznelson, 2006; Rothenberg, 2002). Given that higher wages and home ownership are two primary ways to build family wealth over time, 70 years and three generations later, the housing patterns, class differences, and residential segregation in Meadowbrook reflect that history.

Further, people carry their histories. Your histories inform what you think, how you feel, and how you react. This is true of everyone! People who have been taught that they’re entitled to a good education assume and expect that, and will be on the lookout to demand it should they suspect the school is falling short. Conversely, people whose lived experience in schools includes a pattern of unfair, disrespectful, and exclusionary
treatment toward their community will be on the lookout for signs that pattern is repeating.

**Structural**

In equity is also structural, meaning that the way our system of schooling, and our entire society for that matter, are built and organized predictably lead to the types of disparate outcomes that exist today. It is not a coincidence that neighborhoods and schools are arranged in such a way that children tend to go to school with others who share their race or socioeconomic class. In Meadowbrook, although the secondary schools enroll all grade-level students from the community, the elementary schools are neighborhood-based. As noted, Meadowbrook’s housing patterns reflect income and wealth patterns. Nationally, 78 percent of families with middle and upper incomes and wealth tend to live in homes that they are purchasing that help them build wealth and enjoy income tax deductions, while at least 52 percent of families with lower incomes live in rental properties where they face rising rents and the subsequent costs of moving households repeatedly over time. Further, these trends reflect racial divisions as well, with 72 percent of White families living in and purchasing their homes, while 58 percent of African American families and 49 percent of all families of color live in rental properties (U.S. Census Bureau News, 2020). Meadowbrook matches these national demographics and, as a result, the elementary schools’ enrollments are economically and racially segregated, as schools are throughout the United States.

This segregation is structural and serves to continue inequity: when students attend schools that are highly resourced, they have access to an array of both tangible and intangible benefits that are rarely available to students in under-resourced areas. From athletic facilities to advanced placement classes to social and professional networks that provide an invitation into schools and employment to “get ahead,” these types of structural factors serve to leave current arrangements undisturbed. In Meadowbrook, one can look to the school fundraisers to see one small way this structural inequality creates other forms of inequality. In all the schools, the parent-teacher organizations (PTO) organize fundraisers every year where students sell products to raise money for the schools. In the wealthy quadrant of town, the PTO runs one fundraiser per year, which brings in $65,000 that is used to purchase extra equipment and enrichment activities for students, in addition to providing funds to staff an after-school, high-tech enrichment program. At the elementary school that enrolls most of the students who live in rental housing with federal assistance, the PTO runs two sales each year and five
other fundraisers at the school, including a carnival and a bake sale. Because families at this school, and their family and social networks, have far lower disposable incomes than the families at the other school, and despite the fact that people with lower incomes tend to donate a larger percentage of their income than people with higher incomes, all of these efforts result in only $15,000 in extra cash for the school. The school uses these funds to purchase playground supplies and to fund an extra part-time teaching assistant to run the volunteer program with a local business that has adopted the school, sending mentors and reading buddies to work with “students in need.”

**Institutional**

Inequity is institutional as well. In other words, the laws, rules, processes, and organizations we use to engage in schooling and other aspects of our lives all work to continue historical and current patterns of inequity. Decades of tax, finance, and banking policies and practices have been built on top of the GI Bill, such that it is easy to avoid noticing how these institutionalized policies and practices actually serve to reproduce and entrench existing inequities. Housing inequity, for example, contributes to school inequity: because housing in the United States is racially and economically segregated, and children in the United States tend to go to schools near where they live, children end up going to school with other children of their same race and income level. Because school budgets are funded primarily at the local and state level through property taxes, economic housing segregation leads to inequities in school funding patterns. This pattern is institutionalized through recent court decisions reducing federal involvement in school desegregation efforts; through federal and state housing policies and programs; through banking practices that resulted in families of color losing far greater ground than White families following the 2008 economic and housing crisis; and through local decisions about attendance zones that create neighborhood schools. It’s a complex and complicated web, and without certain pieces of historical knowledge, it is easy for one to look at it all and determine that the system is fair and neutral, rather than recognize that inequity has been and is historical, structural, and institutionalized.

**Individual/Interpersonal**

For many, the default way of defining racism and other forms of discrimination involves overt, intentional acts of individual meanness, exclusion, and unfair treatment. You might even think of organized white supremacists and people who commit hate crimes. It is easy to think that only bad people who carry bad attitudes are the ones who perpetuate racism, sexism, class discrimination, ableism, and other forms of inequity.
Thinking about inequity this way allows you to think that you are not a part of it, and although you might take a role in fixing it, you can continue to think that you are doing nothing to contribute to it. Still, science has concluded inarguably that everyone carries unconscious biases; these kinds of unconscious biases contribute to negative judgment, exclusion, and discrimination.

This happens in many ways. In Meadowbrook, teachers often assume that families who live in low-income housing are “not educated” and do not have the intellectual capacity to help their children learn to read. And conversely, they assume that families in higher-income households are fully engaged in supporting their children’s education. They also direct these perceptions to the children. It’s not uncommon for the same teacher to say in a professional learning session, “I believe all kids can learn” and then later say to his teaching peer, “I have tried so hard to teach him, but honestly, Jamal is never going to make it past multiplication and division.” Other educators say things like, “You can tell in 1st grade which kids aren’t going to make it.” Or “I’m not being racist, but it sure seems like the kids from the apartments just aren’t very motivated, so they don’t work very hard.” These judgments and opinions can come from a mean-spirited and judgmental place, or they can be benevolent and concerned. Either way, they limit some students’ possibilities while giving others the benefit of the doubt.

Why All of This Matters

Recalling that inequity and inequality operate at all four levels of the system, most equity trainings and initiatives address only one or two: They teach about the historic and institutionalized nature of inequity and leave the participant to determine what to do differently at the individual and interpersonal level. Or they provide a technical solution at the individual and interpersonal level, something for the participant to do, but do not ensure that the strategy will make an impact in terms of the institutionalized, structural, or historical causes of inequity. This is one primary reason why equity efforts make little progress.

Instead, professional learning and equity leadership need to account for the full span of these levels; we organized this book accordingly. Practices II and III provide a format and process for improving your equity leadership at the individual and interpersonal levels. Practice IV helps you think about transforming systems to change both the institutionalized and structural aspects of inequity. Finally, Practice V describes
how you can sustain equity change over time to transform the historical trajectory that influences schools today.

**The Levels at Work: Tracking**

Ability-based grouping, or “tracking,” is a common practice in schools consistently proven to perpetuate inequity, illustrating how inequity in schools spans across the four levels.

First, the practice of sorting students is historical, going back to the very beginning of public education in the United States. At the start, public schools were free as they are now, but they were not intended to educate everyone. Instead, they were intended for the “top 10 percent”—those considered “most educable.” As you look at the conversations in schools today related to tracking, this approach continues: the current system of enrichment and advanced placement classes alongside remedial classes perpetuates the idea that students have different levels of ability and their courses should be structured accordingly, despite ongoing research findings that all students can learn at high levels and are best served by enriched and rigorous courses.

In today’s schools, programming and policies serve to sort and separate students according to perceived abilities. For example, special education programming, ability tracking, and programming for English learners are supported by an intricate network of systems, processes, tools, and activities as well as underlying “theories of action” and paradigms. In these ways, inequity is both structural and institutional. In the case of tracking in mathematics programs, for instance, schools use standardized and localized tests to assess students’ mathematics ability. Structurally, individual performance on these tests is connected to future opportunities for education and, eventually, employment; a school’s overall performance dictates the desirability of that school and the home property values around it. Institutionally, tests are built into the school budget and schedule; further, test results impact class placement, staffing, and budgetary decisions. Further ensconcing this inequality is the historical way that teachers learned to teach mathematics in their preparation programs, often learning that the development of math skills is linear, meaning that a student cannot go on to learn the next skill until she has mastered the current skill. These qualities combined create a complex historical, structural, and institutionalized web that keeps both the inputs and the outputs of this system the same. Years of effort under No Child Left Behind served to further entrench this system in many schools, accelerating the sorting of students and schools via schedules, classrooms, practices, programs, and products. Ultimately, this system is
based on the paradigm that the development of math skills is a fixed linear process and that the performance of mathematical calculations at a specific point in time reflects a student’s fixed intellectual capacity.

Last, the idea that this system is fair, effective, and appropriate is held and carried by individuals (teachers, administrators, parents, students). It is transmitted and acted upon between individuals—that is, interpersonally—perhaps none believing they are creating or perpetuating racial and economic inequality. And yet, this system of tracking consistently divides students by race and family income under the guise of perceived ability, such that White, nondisabled, middle- and upper-income students are overrepresented in accelerated classes, while students from lower-income families, students with disabilities, while students of color are overrepresented in remedial classes.

Ask yourself: Do I believe that some students are more capable based on their race, economic class, dis/ability, religion, sexual orientation, family background, and so on? Or can I acknowledge that inequity is built into the system at the individual/interpersonal, institutional, structural, and historical levels? If you answer yes to the second question, then the solution is not to “fix” people who have been marginalized and excluded from this system; instead, it is to fix the system!

Consider how this information applies to your context. Here, it is important to continue the reflection you began in the Introduction: Take the time to write your responses.

**Pause and Reflect**

Consider how inequity is historical, structural, institutionalized, and individual/interpersonal in your context. Too often we are stuck only seeing inequity as individual/interpersonal.

- How do the people who work around you limit the idea of inequity to the individual/interpersonal level?
- In what ways do you see inequity as an individual/interpersonal issue?
- Where do you see historical inequity, structural inequity, institutional inequity, or individual/interpersonal inequity in your school/district/community?
- What barriers do you experience at these levels in trying to advance your equity work?
References


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Urban Education, American Educational Research Journal, Educational Administration Quarterly, Teachers College Record, Review of Educational Research, Journal of School Leadership, and others. He is Past President of the University Council for Educational Administration (UCEA), a consortium of over 100 higher education institutions committed to advancing the preparation and practice of educational leaders and the 2017 recipient of the Jay D. Scribner Mentoring Award. Before entering higher education, he served as a secondary mathematics teacher and departmental chairperson in Columbus Public Schools. He transitioned into higher education as an assistant professor at the University of Cincinnati, where he also directed several leadership programs for seven years. Gooden went on to eventually rise to the role of Margie Gurley Seay Centennial Professor of Education at The University of Texas-Austin where he served as director of the principalship program for nearly nine years. He has spent two decades in higher education developing and teaching courses in culturally responsive leadership, race, law, and research methods and consulting with school districts, universities, and non-profit organizations by designing and delivering professional development courses/workshops in antiracist leadership, law, and community building. He earned his BA in mathematics from Albany State University (a historically Black college/university) and his MEd in Mathematics Education, a second master’s, and a PhD in Policy and Leadership, all from The Ohio State University. He lives in New Rochelle, New York, with his lovely wife and his highly analytical and beautiful daughter.

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Related ASCD Resources

At the time of publication, the following resources were available (ASCD stock numbers appear in parentheses):

*Cultural Competence Now: 56 Exercises to Help Educators Understand and Challenge Bias, Racism, and Privilege* by Vernita Mayfield (#118043)

*Culture, Class, and Race: Constructive Conversations That Unite and Energize Your School and Community* by Brenda CampbellJones, Shannon Keeny, and Franklin CampbellJones (#118010)

*What Every School Leader Needs to Know About RTI* by Margaret Searle (#109097)

*Leading an Inclusive School: Access and Success for ALL Students* by Richard A. Villa and Jacqueline Thousand (#116022)

*Aim High, Achieve More: How to Transform Urban School Through Fearless Leadership* by Yvette Jackson and Veronica McDermott (#112015)

*Turning High-Poverty Schools into High-Performing Schools, 2nd Edition* by William H. Parrett and Kathleen M. Budge (#120031)

*Building Equity: Policies and Practices to Empower All Learners* by Dominique Smith, Nancy E. Frey, Ian Pumpian, and Douglas E. Fisher (#117031)


*Excellence Through Equity: Five Principles of Courageous Leadership to Guide Achievement for Every Student* by Alan M. Blankstein and Pedro Noguera with Lorena Kelly (#116070)

*The Innocent Classroom: Dismantling Racial Bias to Support Students of Color* by Alexs Pate (#120025)

For up-to-date information about ASCD resources, go to www.ascd.org. You can search the complete archives of *Educational Leadership* at www.ascd.org/el.

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