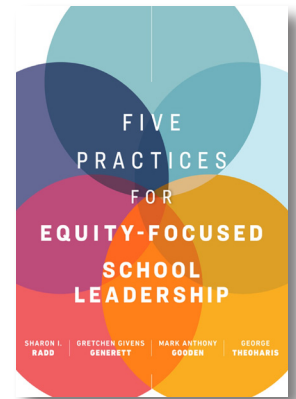


Five Practices for Equity-Focused School Leadership

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THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

In *Five Practices for Equity-Focused School Leadership* the authors' main intent is to help educators build the type of relationships, teams, systems, and practices that make equity central to the experience of their students.

The first practice involves addressing historical, structural, institutional, and individual inequality. Next, school leaders must develop the skills, vocabulary, and context for developing equity-focused leadership today and into the future. Emphasis then moves to developing equity leadership teams. Here, the principles of the previous two practices are put into action in the development, selection, and support of leadership teams that are equity-focused in everything they do. Radiating out from the individual and team level, the next step of building equity focused systems is about helping educators and administrators build lasting and foundational systems that support equity independent of any one leader or team. Finally, leaders discover the information to make sustaining equity a successful career-long pursuit that ultimately leads to positive, systemic transformation.

IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- Why prioritizing equity leadership is essential today and long-term.
- How to prepare for more equity-focused leadership.
- How to build systems that support and foster equity at every level.
- How to sustain equity beyond the short-term, remaining motivated, inspired, and informed on how best to build a more equitable tomorrow for all students.

Practice I: Prioritizing Equity Leadership

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)

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. 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). English learners have graduation rates (Layton, 2014) at approximately 59 percent nationally, with some states graduating only 24 percent of their ELs.

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.

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).

Much can be done to change these circumstances, yet school leaders don't always have the tools, knowledge, and resources to actually do so. This book summary will offer an actionable framework that individual leaders and school, district, and interorganizational teams can use to address this need.

The Challenge and Urgency of Leading for Equity

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. 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.

The Stories We Tell About Why We Don't Do Better

For complex and complicated issues, people often tell simplistic stories that make them feel better about the reality of the difficulties they and others experience. As a result, even in their best efforts to be fully honest, the stories people tell involve omissions, inaccuracies, even exaggerations. Sometimes, stories truly misinform and misrepresent what's going on.

What examples can you think of—in your work or outside of school—where stories shape the reality?

Who benefits from the way the story is told and who is disadvantaged, marginalized, or judged negatively?

Where do you see competing stories that keep you or others stuck in conflict?

What keeps you/them from developing a collaborative or mutually acceptable story?

There are no right or wrong answers to these questions, so resist judging yourself or others negatively. The way that stories shape reality and understanding is common throughout the world and across cultures. However, it's important that you begin to notice them and their impact.

Practice II: Preparing for Equity

Preparing to Learn for Equity: Key Concepts and Guiding Principles

Equity learning produces a range of responses within and among individuals. Consider that your emotions, your desire to understand, your desire to feel competent and worthy, and perhaps most of all, your sense of right and wrong are all affected by equity learning. When we share new equity-focused information, we see in the participants—and feel our own—cognitive, emotional, conceptual, physiological, moral, or technical reactions.

These reactions stem from dissonance related to paradigms. Equity talk touches on self and systems paradigms about what's fair, what's moral and right, what works and what doesn't, and which causes and effects are connected

to each other. One common paradigm is that most people see themselves as good and moral people. At the same time, nearly 75 percent of Americans have an “automatic preference” or unconscious bias that favors Whites over Blacks. Further, this preference or bias is strongly predictive of discriminatory behavior.

Your ability to recognize and work through moments of cognitive dissonance while avoiding and minimizing your defensive routines allows you to engage more fully and effectively in equity-focused leadership.

How do you do this? Your task is to surface and examine your self paradigms and the systems paradigms to which you subscribe.

Exploring Identities: Race

Increasing your understanding of race and how it affects schools and the broader society will help you better understand how to disrupt harmful practices related to race.

Well-meaning educators who have earnestly attempted to avoid judging students according to race have found it puzzling that inequities still occur and persist, often along cultural as well as racial lines. This situation is certainly baffling, and we hope you agree that this is a good reason to investigate race further. If you do, then we suggest that you examine your role as an educator in these race-related practices by asking yourself the following questions:

How am I reproducing versus disrupting the experience for students in terms of their sense of community and social support around race?

How am I reproducing versus disrupting the culture and learning of the adults at the school (teachers, administrators, other staff) around race to create a more inclusive staff?

How am I reproducing versus disrupting the structures, policies, and practices around race?

How am I reproducing versus disrupting the curriculum in terms of race?

Leaders develop a culture of curiosity around racial inequities and frequently seek to measure progress toward raising awareness and the resulting impact on school culture. They consistently seek ways to invent and reinvent policies and practices that create a strong sense of belonging for all students.

Exploring Identities: Disability

In the United States, special education services in preK–12 schools for the 6.5 million students labeled with disabilities are driven and mediated by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004 (IDEA, 2004). The legislation identifies the following categories of disabilities:

- Autism
- Deaf-blindness
- Deafness
- Emotional disturbance
- Hearing impairment
- Intellectual disability
- Multiple disabilities
- Orthopedic impairment
- Other health impairment (OHI) • Specific learning disability (SLD) • Speech or language impairment
- Traumatic brain injury
- Visual impairment (including blindness)

When considering school equity related to students with disabilities, the body of research on the efficacy of inclusive services must both drive structural organization of services and provide a philosophical center for school leadership and school improvement.

To develop fully inclusive schools, leaders need to help their staff develop more inclusive personal and collective paradigms. One step toward achieving this is through the development of three types of collaborative teams. First, you need a service delivery team that oversees, creates, and maintains inclusive structures and services. Second, creating and maintaining inclusive schools requires building instructional teams of professionals who co-plan and co-deliver instruction. Third, authentic inclusion of students with disabilities requires collaboration with families.

Exploring Identities: Socioeconomics

In many ways, thinking about socioeconomics means purposefully seeking to understand economic and class realities in the United States. Although most Americans consider themselves middle class, their daily realities suggest a different situation.

Vast disparities in income and wealth cross all areas of identity. In terms of income, women earn approximately

82 cents for every dollar men earn (Center for American Progress, 2020), and Blacks earn approximately 74 cents for every dollar Whites earn (Economic Policy Institute, 2020). Income disparities contribute to profound wealth disparities over time. Wealth disparities have increased significantly over the past four decades and are now far greater than income disparities. For example, White families on average have 20 times the wealth of Black families and 18 times the wealth of Latino families (Gorski, 2013).

Income disparities affect the way children and families are able to access and participate in education.

Leaders must disrupt dangerous practices and deficit thinking around socioeconomics in order to create more equitable schools and systems.

Exploring Identities: Language

Students whose first language is not English now account for close to 5 million students or 10 percent of all public school students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020d). They bring hundreds of different languages to the classroom (Kindler, 2002). Although large numbers of immigrants and refugees have traditionally settled in major urban areas, they are now putting down roots in suburbs and rural areas (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020d). As a result, ELs are now enrolled in schools and classrooms that have not traditionally served a linguistically diverse student body. With the EL population anticipated to double by the year 2050, most, if not all, teachers are likely to teach ELs in the coming years (Meskill, 2005).

We know that equitable schooling for ELs “is informed and buoyed by two sources: an asset-based orientation toward language and knowledge of the research on second language acquisition” (Theoharis & O’Toole, 2011, p. 650). An asset-based language orientation encourages administrators to seek change and helps them develop a sound knowledge base that influences their vision for addressing the educational needs of ELs. The schools in which ELs are most successful have leaders who know and use the research on language (Montecel, Cortez, & Cortez, 2002).

Leadership around EL is essential. It requires substantial knowledge of and advocacy for ELs and their families. Leaders need to take a collaborative approach while embracing a strong vision for improving services for ELs. Leadership that focuses on asset-based, inclusive approaches leverages the opportunity for all students to thrive academically and socially.

Exploring Identities: Sex, Gender Identity, and Sexual Identity

Cisnormativity, heteronormativity, and homophobia contribute to profoundly oppressive contexts for students, especially queer youth. Research suggests that, invariably, educators prescribe attributes to students based on biological sex and cisgender paradigms; in doing so, they maintain and replicate sex and gender-based inequities in schools. For example, heterosexual cisgender males and their perspectives are most represented within curriculum in U.S. schools. Across the 20th century—the time during which current teachers and administrators engaged with literature as children—children’s books contained, on average, two male characters for every one female character—assumedly all cisgender (McCabe, Fairchild, Grauerholz, Pescosolido, & Tope, 2011). Further, it’s well documented that many teachers unconsciously choose cisgender male students as the first students to respond or volunteer to answer questions (Sadker, Sadker, & Zittleman, 2009). In this context, cisgender girls and gender-nonconforming individuals are often silenced and rendered invisible, while cisgender male students receive more feedback and more of a teacher’s time and energy.

Reflect

As gender diversity and LGBTQIA+ people and issues have become far more visible in the last decade, how do you personally feel about the variety of gender expressions and identities that are now more evident? What about the variety of sexual identities? Are your feelings and thoughts inclusive or marginalizing for some? If so, what resources are available to you to work toward inclusion in your actions and interactions?

In what ways do you notice that the gender binary and heteronormativity are restrictive and marginalizing in your system?

Based upon the examples presented in this chapter, which of the inclusion practices would have the most impact at your school?

Exploring Identities: Religion

School leaders must be aware of religious identity and how it shows up in schools, especially when certain identities are marginalized. Leaders must acknowledge that even though the First Amendment prohibits the establishment of a religion, Christianity is currently the majority religion in the United States. As a result, public schools have historically

allowed the expression and promotion of Christian views and practices without constraint.

Given this reality, leaders must intentionally ensure an inclusive environment and be prepared to respond when intolerance surfaces at any level. Although we are concerned with every person's right to their own religion, equity-focused school leaders must be particularly concerned with ensuring the rights, safety, and security of those students who are in the religious minority.

How do students who are in the religious minority feel in your school? Are they expected to participate in, and be witness to, majority-religion activities?

Consistently centering and allowing one religion while marginalizing others sends strong messages about the school's position on diversity. School officials can and should be proactive about ensuring a religiously inclusive environment, while maintaining the separation of church and state.

Practice III: Developing Equity Leadership Teams

Routines for Building Effective and Cohesive Equity Leadership Teams

Your next task is to begin modeling for and engaging others in relationship building, learning, and meaningful equity-focused work—that is, to form a leadership team. This approach contrasts with the popular notion of the singular or heroic leader, which is rarely effective over time. Instead, equity-focused leaders need colleagues who are similarly committed. Leadership teams that are focused on transformative systems change must be capable, cohesive, and equipped with the cognitive, relational, and strategic skills to be effective.

Four Routines for Equity-Focused Leadership Teams

Routine 1: Expand and Strengthen Relationships

When you build strong relationships across differences in race, disability, socioeconomic class, language, sex, gender, sexuality, and religion, you expose yourself to different ways of knowing and being in the world.

With this in mind, you should expand and strengthen key relationships—using the following four steps as your guide for getting started:

- Make relationships a top priority.
- Assume best intentions in your interactions and relationships.
- Allow time for people to share personal and professional stories.
- Commit to engage in conflict constructively.

Routine 2: Transform Use of Power

Transforming the use of power means moving from a hierarchical structure and punitive process to an inclusive, engaging, community-building process. It means shared power and ownership in who the team is and the work the team does. It requires that power be used equitably, humanely, for the right purposes, in the right ways, and toward the right ends.

Routine 3: Integrate Personal Experience with Systems and Trend Data

Routine 3 guides you in integrating your personal experience with systems and trend data. Doing so is important because sometimes personal experience contradicts trend data.

Routine 4: Assess the Credibility of Data

“Statistics can be used to prove anything—even the truth.” Your lenses, priorities, and access determine the types of data you get. Consider that for a moment. Are you seeking data that support your beliefs and assumptions, to prove what you already believe? Or are you seeking a robust understanding, such that you continue to assess data for their accuracy and completeness? Are you willing to have your mind changed? This is what we mean when we say, “Assess the credibility of data.”

Team Roles - We recommend that equity-focused leadership teams regularly attend to four roles: Educator, Leadership Practitioner, Equity Champion, and Decision Maker. The roles are ways of thinking about how you show up as an equity leader in various spaces and for what purpose.

Educator - We use the term educator to represent the idea that each person in a learning community is both teacher and learner. Remember, each individual in a classroom—adults and children—brings the capacity and the knowledge to teach others as well as the obligation to learn from them.

Leadership Practitioner - To be a Leadership Practitioner means to think of your leadership as a professional practice and to engage in regular, critical reflection to improve it.

Equity Champion - Equity Champions are individuals who

keep equity at the center of their decisions and advance equity through their micro and macro actions and interactions. Although this definition is concise, it is packed with meaning. Stepping into and maintaining the role of Equity Champion requires ongoing, continual, and long-term awareness and commitment.

Decision Maker - Leaders have profound responsibility in decision making. Inclusive decision-making processes are those that meaningfully and authentically involve the people closest to the problem in defining the problem and discerning the solution.

Practice IV: Building Equity-Focused Systems

Conducting a Needs Assessment

Across the many available equity-audit models, several steps are common: establishing an audit team, designing the audit, collecting data, analyzing the data, identifying strategic priorities, and developing action plans. Throughout each step, you also need an effective communication plan to inform those stakeholders who are not directly involved about what is going on, and to obtain permission and support as necessary.

Analyzing Data and Identifying Findings

Your data collection activities will produce an abundance of information. Once you have completed your data collection, it is time to organize and analyze that information. We cannot overstate how important it is that you learn from the data and then use your learning to generate new, improved equity-focused actions. Gathering information and then proceeding as though the effort had never taken place is damaging to school-community relationships and a leader's credibility as well as an extraordinary waste of precious resources.

In addition, as you begin the data analysis process, know that it takes a lot of time. You should spend at least as much time and effort, if not more, in the data analysis stage of your audit as you did on data collection. Accordingly, you need to plan processes that allow time for people to sit with the data, explore what the information means, and consider the why behind it.

A Framework for Designing Sustainable, Systemic, Equity-Focused Change

Once you have worked through a collaborative process to analyze your data, the next step is to consider how to turn

your insights and conclusions into a set of strategic priorities, an initial action plan, and a framework for ongoing equity-focused improvement. The equity audit data and analysis will most likely point to several areas needing improvement. Don't be discouraged if the list initially looks and feels insurmountable. No district can fix everything at once, so avoid feeling overwhelmed. Reference this quote from James Baldwin to maintain your motivation and inspire others: "Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced."

Remember, change is difficult, and change for equity is far more challenging than other changes because it requires high levels of personal investment in areas that cause tension and discomfort.

Practice V: Sustaining Equity

We want to remind you of the courage and commitment it will take for you to sustain your equity leadership over time. Equity leadership is not for the faint of heart. Over the course of your career as an equity leader, at one time or another you may end up questioning almost everything you ever learned or believed. You may become incredibly discouraged when you realize how powerful systems of inequality really are; how deeply entrenched old habits can be even when they are clearly inequitable; how much neglect and harm is inflicted upon children and their families who are marginalized; how much you did not or do not yet know about race and racism, ableism, homophobia, or religious intolerance; how few are the authentic relationships—or even encounters—you have with people who are different from you.

You must not give up. We believe we will not reach the end of this work in our lifetimes—but that doesn't excuse us from committing our best efforts, skills, and assets to move it forward. As Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "The arc of the universe is long, but it bends toward justice." Your job is to do as much as you can, as well as you can, for as long as you can. If we all do that, we will make significant progress.

Five Practices for Equity-Focused School Leadership



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