

# EQUITY POLICY STEERING COMMITTEE

## MEETING AGENDA

Thursday, March 31, 2022

5:15 p.m. – 6:45 p.m.

Via Zoom: <https://osd111.zoom.us/j/84366268093>

WELCOME/INTRODUCTION/AGREEMENTS REVIEW

DATA EXERCISE RECAP

ASSET MAPPING

FOCUS GROUP PLANNING

- One Pager
- Who?
- Venue?
- Facilitation
- Record Keeping/Report Out

QUESTIONS

- Next Meeting/Future Meetings

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## MEETING NOTES

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## Foreword

Relationship between student and teacher, where one generation ensures the existence of the other. Through our efforts flowed the hope and promise that society would not only continue but be transformed.

The notion that high-stakes testing has taken all of that away from us is debunked by Floyd Cobb and John Krownapple. Even though our current system in many ways views students as achievers and non-achievers, the authors remind us that students are human beings who need to feel a sense of belonging and connection. Based on research, they contend that when students feel a sense of belonging, they will achieve. As is the case in many school systems, achievement has taken priority over personhood. I have known both authors for many years, and they practice what they preach.

This isn't just another book about equity or closing achievement gaps. It's a book about belonging- the very heart and soul of teaching and learning. It was clear to me that the heart and soul of teaching had been badly bruised when I attended back-to-school night at my granddaughter's high school and listened to one of her teachers address her audience. She gave us her qualifications and then said, "If your child needs too much help in this class, she probably doesn't belong here." The teacher went on to explain that she was available after school to help struggling students, but that if a student needs a tutor, the teacher's help, plus the after-school support program in order to succeed, the student should consider dropping to a "lower level" class. My granddaughter (who was in attendance) leaned over and whispered to me, "Even if I need help, I am not leaving. I belong in this class."

Having little confidence that she would receive the instruction she deserved, I hired (unbeknownst to the teacher) a tutor for my granddaughter. She took advantage of the after-school homework program that the school offered, in addition to after-school help from her teacher. Needless to say, our family rallied around her to encourage and support her sense of belonging in a classroom that did not welcome her. My granddaughter's achievement and confidence took a turn upward during the second semester when she reported to me, "I think my teacher finally likes me." Imagine what she could have achieved in that classroom had the teacher made her feel as though she had belonged from the start-a sense of being pulled in rather than pushed out from day one.

I am delighted to write this foreword, not only because Floyd and John are friends and colleagues but also because I believe deeply in the educative value of treating our children as human beings rather than units of scores to be moved from one stanine to another.

I was formerly a principal, and *Belonging Through a Culture of Dignity: The Keys to Successful Equity Implementation* reminded me of my staff. They embodied the belief that relationships and belonging support achievement. In fact, they used many of the approaches mentioned in this book. They work! I urge you to try them. Return a sense of dignity, belonging, and inclusion to our children, and reconnect to the inspiration and energy that called you into teaching in the first place.

Brenda CampbellJones, PhD

CEO, CampbellJones & Associates

# Chapter 1

## Hidden In Plain Sight: The Keys To Success With Equity

"Only in the darkness you can see the stars."

- Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

### Reflect on Equity Initiatives

What experience do you have with equity-focused professional development? Describe the strengths and weaknesses of the approach you're familiar with. Then describe the degree to which it prompted significant change in schools and classrooms.

#### What Isn't Working and What We Can Do About It

Educational equity initiatives simply aren't working or aren't working well enough. Between the two of us (Floyd and John), we've dedicated decades to helping schools and districts become more inclusive, fair, and just. Along the way, we've critiqued approaches to equity that have fallen short of their goals. We've noticed stagnation, regression, and even backlash. By categorizing our observations, we've established a predictable pattern of equity-initiative failure.

We have a big problem in equity work, a problem that any educator serious about equitable change dare not dismiss. In this book, we're going to present our proposed theory and solution: Inclusion, belonging, and dignity are the keys to success in equity work. We believe that these keys have not been identified and understood, or they've been falsely assumed, undervalued, or ignored. For equity initiatives to succeed, we believe that educators must focus on shaping inclusive environments intentionally designed to foster a sense of belonging by honoring the dignity of each and every person.

We're not criticizing equity work as such. The questions we raise in this book are not intended as an attack on educational equity theorists. Their work has gotten us thus far, and for that we are grateful. Rather, our questions revolve around why current approaches are not working (or not working well enough), and our thesis applies research on engaged practice, policy analysis, and academic research from a variety of disciplines, some of which (as far as we know) have not hitherto been applied explicitly to equity in education. We're comparing the assumptions and presuppositions of our numbers-obsessed current system against research that looks at the larger perspective of how human nature and motivation actually function. It is our contention that our current system views students not as full human beings but in a partial way as units of achievement or non-achievement. In short, what we are criticizing is the common implementation of equity initiatives within our schools.

To state the obvious, it's possible to do the right thing but in the wrong way.

Despite living thousands of miles apart (Floyd in Colorado; John in Maryland), we've noticed the same pattern of equity-initiative failure within our local schools and districts. We've listened to colleagues across the nation and they report the same dynamics. Furthermore, we've learned from our own mistakes as active participants in the very same pattern. Regardless of geographic region or size of the school or district, educational equity initiatives are not leading to meaningful change. Of course, that's a general statement. In small pockets, some initiatives are getting positive results, but those efforts haven't been influential enough to change the system at large. In most cases, the initiatives have proven predictably disappointing. We've outlined this pattern in what we call the Dysfunctional Cycle of Equity Work (shown below).

In our presentations to educators and workshops about the Dysfunctional Cycle of Equity Work, we begin by introducing a short metaphorical story known as The Streetlight Effect (Freedman, 2010; Jervis, 1993). The dysfunctional cycle is a reactive pattern and The Streetlight Effect can help us understand why we keep repeating the same pattern. The story can also suggest how we can move from reaction to being proactive. The Streetlight Effect is used in psychology and management studies to show the dangers and drawbacks of observational bias. It's a wry parable about our human habit to seek solutions in familiar and easy places and thus miss the real solution. The story goes like this:

One dark evening, a policeman sees a man on his hands and knees searching for something under a streetlight and asks what he's looking for. The man-who's inebriated in the most popular version of the story-says he's lost his keys. Together they look on the pavement within the little circle of light cast by the streetlight. After thirty seconds or so, the policeman asks if the man is sure he lost his keys here. The man replies, no, he lost them in the park. In amazement, the policeman asks why on earth is he searching under the streetlight. The man says, "This is where the light is." (Freedman, 2010)

This story always brings a chuckle, but it's a sober caution to those of us seeking to understand why current equity initiatives aren't working. The lesson is that our field has a habit of searching for answers where it's easy to look: trends, fads, buzzwords, educable, reactive patterns, solutions aimed at fixing people, or whatever hot interventions vendors are selling at educational conferences. This is the area illuminated by the streetlight. In addition, people often fear or ignore whatever is outside the radius of light, that is, whatever is beyond their experience and comfort zone. We believe we need to look beyond what is already known and practiced. The key to equity is still in the shadows. It's time to bring it into the light.

It has been 65 years since the Brown v. Board of Education decision, and across the nation, our students' educational experiences are still racially separate and unequal (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2016). It has been nearly 20 years since the increased focus on achievement gaps, but there still exists a marked disproportionality between student groups (National Education Association, 2015). With so little progress in so much time, we need to ask if we've been searching for solutions in the wrong places.

Are we looking where it's easiest? Have we been focusing on the wrong things? Are we like the man in the story, deprived of reason from our observational bias (our tendency to see only what we expect or want to see)? Are we unaware that anything exists beyond the light provided by a system designed to maintain itself? Can we move past relying exclusively on strategies such as mandatory diversity, equity, or antibias training? Are we ready to deal with the underlying reasons why we haven't ventured further afield? These are the questions we need to reflect on, but in order to do so profitably, we first need to take a critical look at what has become the current and predictable patterns of implementing equity initiatives in our schools. But keep these questions in mind as we examine what "business as usual" looks like.

### The Dysfunctional Cycle of Equity Work

Chances are high that if you've engaged in equity work in your school or district, you've experienced a cyclical reactive pattern similar to this.

1. "Catalyst!" Something draws a school's/district's attention to inequity. Often, it's exposure or discovery of disproportionality in student outcome data and the resultant negative impact on the school's public accountability rating and perception. At its worst, this catalyst could be a hate crime or bias incident that brings about a significant amount of media attention. Whatever the reason, an external event serves as a catalyst that shocks the school system into prioritizing equity.
2. "We believe in equity for every student." In response to the catalyst, a school or district leader makes a public commitment to equity. "We believe in equity" or "This [inequity] isn't who we are" are familiar statements. Families of the most impacted students are relieved and excited to hear about this proclamation of values. Furthermore, equity-passionate educators and other parties get zealous, while less-passionate parties remain skeptical or even protest the commitment. Some may perceive equity as the latest buzzword, the leader's pet project, or a passing fad to wait out.
3. "Let's form a committee to lead the effort." Often, the school/district then moves from the public pronouncement to starting a committee. The district leadership (superintendent, school board, etc.) usually takes a limited leadership role, directing a group of equity-passionate individuals to convene with the goal of making the public declaration actionable. Whether they are teachers, teacher-leaders, or assistant principals, these people rarely have the positional authority or technical expertise to bring about real change. Ultimately, the committee decides that the equity initiative requires training for staff on whatever strategy is currently under the metaphoric streetlight (e.g., implicit bias). The committee may even attempt to lead the effort. What results is training that is limited or misguided (e.g., focus on diversity instead of equity; failure to use a process or establish trust; unawareness of standards for professional learning).
4. "I know someone who can help." Because equity-passionate is not the same as equity-competent, the committee discovers their limitations in capacity and expertise. They need help. This may have resulted from attempting the work and running into problems. Regardless, the committee seeks an outside speaker/consultant who uses an attractive, en vogue approach. Equity-passionate staff and families become re-enthused and hope returns. The training ensues, often focusing on leadership. Upon its completion, some educators feel validated, while others-usually White and/or those who are well-served by the current structure-leave feeling uneasy, offended, or even blamed. Negative conversations happen in private, and rumors spread. Meanwhile, those most impacted by the catalyst grow confused by the negative reactions they start to hear. They believed the training was exactly what the system needed, yet responsible educators appear to be acting irresponsibly by disparaging a program

aimed at helping the most vulnerable students.

5. "We're (re)starting the conversation." After the consultant leaves, the training program becomes the responsibility of the original committee. This group often assumes a train-the-trainer stance and attempts to recreate the experience for others. However, the committee still hasn't developed the capacity to hold the space for critical conversations, nor have they developed the expertise in content or transformative process. Perhaps unwittingly, the training becomes reduced to learning about others (diversity) instead of system- level change (equity). Perhaps, also unwittingly, the committee takes the stance of a presenter instead of a facilitator and ends up being perceived as speaking down to their colleagues. Meanwhile, some educators have heard the negative rumors and show up to the training mentally prepared to actively disengage. Although equity-passionate educators cheer on the committee, others do not. Many White teachers, those who are well-served by the current structure, and those who are entering an equity conversation for the first time feel offended and blamed. At best, they tune out. At worst, they sabotage.

6. "Why aren't we seeing anything change?" As time passes after the training, dismay begins to grow across the organization. Those who were offended by the training retreat into small groups where they can commiserate quietly amongst themselves about the initiative. Those who were supportive grow frustrated by the lack of strategy and follow-up to the event. Dismayed by the fact that they are still witnessing the type of harmful behaviors and statements that led to the equity initiative, they raise their voices: "Why isn't anything changing?" Meanwhile, the public or governing structures such as boards of education begin asking to see returns on their investments. They want to know how the equity initiative is bringing about change. The committee may need to report.

7. "Let's focus on something practical and not so esoteric." As the pressure for results increases, people scurry toward the glow of the familiar "streetlight" in an effort to answer these cries for help and demands for accountability. Someone with influence inevitably suggests focusing on the classroom and an equity pedagogy such as culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2010). Or, perhaps they appropriate a technique that is merely a component of an approach that requires a complete paradigm shift (e.g., community circles from restorative justice). The approach seems practical and gains support even among those who were skeptical about the initiative. The leadership team then trains or directs teachers in the approach, hoping that these efforts will bring about the needed change.

8. "Just tell us what you want us to do and we'll do it." The training on culturally responsive techniques leaves many participants feeling confused by the esoteric nature of the concept. Frustration grows, and even educators committed to the effort plead for a list of practical strategies for the classroom. But since equity pedagogies operate responsively and not prescriptively, equity leaders answer that there aren't any checklists or mandatory strategies. The concept of responsiveness remains abstract and elusive. Or, training in techniques such as community circles happens quickly, without a theoretical foundation. Educators implement such techniques, as directed, and fail to see why they're such a big deal.

9. "It's just good teaching, after all." Due to the lack of a prescriptive course of action with the equity pedagogy, many teachers rationalize inaction by reducing things to "just good teaching" (Ladson-Billings, 1995). They focus on an existing aspect of practice- such as cooperative learning- and rationalize approaches like culturally responsive teaching as something good teachers (like them) already do. During trainings, some of them might even say, "I'm 100% on board, but we're not the ones who really need to be here." Teachers charged with implementing a technique such as community circles grow tired of it. They become frustrated because of "losing time when they could be teaching." Soon thereafter the teachers relegate the equity initiative to just "one more thing."

10. "Remember when we used to focus on this type of thing . . ." The status quo remains firmly intact. The espoused commitment to equity does not translate into equity in action. The situation in classrooms changes very little, if at all. In fact, the effort may have done damage. The equity initiative quietly fades away and attention shifts to other matters. That is, until another catalyst occurs and returns us to Step 1. Then the dismal, dysfunctional cycle begins its next iteration.

Encompassing everything described here, we offer this theory of failure (Figure 1.1) as a reinforcing loop, a foundational structure of systems thinking (Senge, 1990). Reinforcing loops show how actions produce results that end up influencing more of the same action, building on itself over time. When it illustrates an undesirable result, such as ill-informed equity initiatives that perpetuate inequity in schools, the loop is generally referred to as a viscous cycle (Stroh, 2009).

### Unintended Consequences

As you read through this cycle, perhaps you shook your head, remembering your own experiences in a similar loop of misguided action and frustration. We know this Dysfunctional Cycle of Equity Work well. Too well, in fact. That's what led us to write this book. At best, the fact that this dismal situation is not unique lets educators know that we're not alone in our frustrating experiences. We (Floyd and John) have both witnessed, all too often, this cycle of addressing issues of inequity through a crisis model (Williams, 2008), and this has shown us the collateral damage this equity work failure causes in educational climates and cultures. Teachers feel alienated and blamed. Relational trust (Bryk & Schneider, 2002) between colleagues is low. Families are let down. Equity champions on the staff feel disheartened and defeated. Money and resources are wasted, and the ultimate casualties are the students.

The truth is that research shows that most diversity trainings do not have the positive and long-lasting impact that they are presumed to have (Dobbin & Kalev, 2017; Kalev, Dobbin, & Kelly, 2006). This is especially true for those programs that focus heavily on antibias or prejudice reduction. Studies show that most trainings (especially when mandated) result in form of "symbolic compliance" (Edelman, 1990; Meyer & Rowan, 1977) where the majority of participants passively-aggressively comply until the experience is over. At worst, these trainings take an approach that leaves participants feeling a deep sense of blame, shame, and guilt, and the effort winds up causing greater backlash toward fellow employees who are members of marginalized communities.

# The Keys to Equity Are Within Our Reach

The Dysfunctional Cycle of Equity Work represents the unfortunate "business as usual" model. Its failure is not intentional-far from it-but it is still failure. Our thesis, as informed by the observational bias in *The Streetlight Effect*, is that we need to venture beyond where we are now and move into as-yet unexplored areas (the metaphorical darkness beyond the streetlight). We need to explore new ground. Our current strategies are the problem- our current ways of "doing equity"-and not the goal of equity itself. Throughout this book, we're going to look beyond business as usual. We're going to examine the foundational reason why the current approaches don't work. That foundational reason is the non-inclusive and non-welcoming (certain students, families, or staff members don't belong) climate that is inherent in our school system. We're going to address the question of how it is that we've granted ourselves permission to create classroom, school, and district cultures where we can and do disregard the inherent value and worth of certain people. These negative environments create the broken system that no Band-Aid strategies can fix.

Unwelcoming environments where certain people do not belong are part of the legacy we've inherited as educators in this country. But we can bring light to this situation and learn how to create positive, inclusive environments: climates of belonging through cultures of dignity. In these environments equity can take root and flourish. With the keys to success of inclusion, belonging, and dignity, we will have what's needed to break the cycle of dysfunctional equity initiatives

## The Bottom Line

- When it comes to educational equity, the commonly accepted solutions to problems of inequity don't work.
- The metaphoric streetlight illuminates things that don't work: easy solutions, buzzwords, and trends.
- Across the nation, schools/districts have relied on solutions that haven't worked.
- Solutions that don't work perpetuate a common dysfunctional cycle of equity initiatives.
- A reinforcing loop, the cycle involves four predictable stages: a catalyst, a public commitment to equity, challenges with implementing equity, and acceptance of the status quo.
- As part of the cycle, schools/districts often and unwittingly implement some sort of diversity training proven by research to be ineffective and potentially counterproductive.
- Educators can break the dysfunctional cycle by looking beyond common solutions, trendy jargon, and approaches that enable the system to maintain itself in the darkness of what has largely been unexplored.
- The keys to successful equity-initiative implementation are in the darkness.
- Personal and systemic transformation requires us to confront ourselves and our school culture and the reasons why we haven't looked outside of the streetlight's illumination, which is where we will find the keys to success.

·In the next chapter, we will explore the first key to success-the concept of inclusion.