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Introduction

Why Equity Matters

May 2024 will mark the 70th anniversary of the historic *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling. At the time, the *Brown* decision was hailed as a landmark judicial decision that would address one of the most stubborn and complex realities of U.S. life: unequal education. Core to the idea of equal education for all students was a dismantling of racial inequities that have plagued non-white students for centuries in the United States. *Brown*, at the time, in all its hubris sought to end racial inequality in U.S. schools and, in the eyes of many, was thought to be a potential catalyst for how racial equality in other aspects of U.S. society could be achieved. The idea was that if the nation could do better by its young people and schools, the rest of the country would soon follow suit. In almost three-quarters of a century since the *Brown* decision was rendered, the dreams, hopes, and wishes of a country built on freedom, justice, and equal opportunity have been deferred for many and outright denied for others. In the words of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., in his famous March on Washington speech of 1963:

In a sense we've come to our nation's capital to cash a check. . . . It is obvious today that America has defaulted on this promissory note insofar as her citizens of color are concerned. Instead of honoring this sacred obligation, America has given the Negro people a bad check, a check which has come back marked "insufficient funds."

How can schools, and the United States, honor the request of Dr. King to hold our nation, and its schools, to the promise of fairness, justice, and the pursuit of happiness? In many ways,

schools have served as an experimental site for the wider United States when it comes to racial justice, hope, and opportunity. How can U.S. schools deliver on the promissory note that Dr. King talked about when it comes to a basic and fundamental right such as education? Many in this country are hopeful for a first-rate education for their children, yet it remains elusive for too many—desperately desired, but for so many unattainable. Families move across district, city, and state lines; immigrant families make tremendous sacrifices across borders and oceans; working families work multiple jobs; and parents and caregivers spend massive amounts of their income, all with the hope of getting their children a good education. So, questions remain. Can we achieve racial equity in schools? Can education be the proverbial equalizer for social mobility, racial harmony, and societal cohesion? The idea is that if schools can serve as harbingers of justice and spaces of integration, opportunity, and access, other aspects of the nation will follow in creating the type of democratic society that abides by its lofty ideals and principles. Educational researcher Rosalyn Mickelson wrote a compelling research article in 1990 called “The Attitude-Achievement Paradox Among Black Adolescents.” What she found is that despite ongoing obstacles to equal education, poor performance, and less-than-ideal supports in schools, education was still highly valued by Black youth, Black families, and Black communities. She reported that Black youth have positive attitudes about education and believe in the power of education as a vehicle for social mobility. Yet, seven decades after the *Brown* ruling, many of the stubborn educational inequities that fall along racial and socioeconomic lines have not diminished. Why do those whom the nation has gone to great lengths to deny education still believe in the power that it has?

In a moment when our nation is becoming increasingly diverse along racial and ethnic lines, the reality is that those on the margins of society still hold a firm desire and belief that with a good education there is no limit to how far one can go. I am often reminded of the comments my father, who grew up in the segregated South in the '40s and '50s, would make to my brother and me when it came to education. He frequently said, “Take your education seriously. Get as much of it as you can, because once you get it, no one can ever take it from you.” Those words have resonated with me for a lifetime, and it is a sentiment that countless other adults heard growing up and a message that many young people continue to hear from parents, caregivers, and other family members today. In short, the message was then, and is today, loud and clear: education matters. At a time when new economies and emerging technologies continue to

emerge and creative, diverse, cross-collaborative citizens are in an increasingly interdependent world essential, education still matters, but opportunities to learn have remained stubbornly intact for many students. Notable progress cannot be denied for the education of BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, people of color) students in the nation's schools over the past several generations. However, what remains painfully clear with almost any examination of P-20 systems is that educational justice and equality in education remain elusive. Derek Bell (2004), a noted legal scholar, says of *Brown* that the justices tried to solve a social problem with a legal remedy. In essence, Bell wondered, can you legislate hearts and minds when it comes to educational opportunity? In many ways, race, gender, socioeconomic status, language, and ability all remain considerable points of contention when it comes to who receives educational access and opportunity in the United States. Why does race continue to plague educational opportunity? Why do anti-Black racism, anti-Asian hate, and xenophobia remain a reality in far too many schools across the country? Why has a student's zip code continued to be a reliable predictor of school opportunity and success? Why has *Brown* not reached its lofty goals? What does our science tell us about educational opportunity? Why do so many aspects of educational research, policy, and practice omit examinations of race and racism? How have we addressed gender inequities in schools? As educational leaders, thinkers, practitioners, scholars, researchers, and policymakers, it is essential for our community to start and sustain a national and international dialogue about opportunity and education for all students comprehensively and collaboratively. It is vital to create an intersectional lens to how and why we do the work that we do. Why has our quest for equality been so elusive? Are we okay with certain students not getting the type of education that all students deserve? The purpose of this book is to focus squarely on a term that has been used excessively in education over the past two decades—*equity*. We need equity now. Not next week, not next month, not next year, but in a much more urgent fashion, as in now. We need a hard reset on educational equity and racial justice in schools. Many thought that the reopening of schools postpandemic would provide us an opportunity to reimagine schools and to think bold and creatively about education. Unfortunately, we have largely gone back to business as usual. Our children need and deserve more equitable practices and more equitable schools. But more importantly, what does equity look like in action? I have had the honor of working with hundreds of schools and thousands of teachers and leaders over the past two decades, and what I have consistently heard is that there is a clearer sense of what the term *equity* means, but less clarity about what it looks like in action. This book seeks to

address the gap between how we understand equity conceptually and what equity looks like in practice. Equity in action rests on the idea that large segments of today's student population are not receiving the type of education that they deserve; moreover, the overwhelming number of students who come from racially diverse and low-income backgrounds are among those most in need of better educational opportunities. Students who are among our most vulnerable need something different in today's schools.

The 2020s will be seen through a historical lens as one of the most monumental decades when it comes to society's challenges. The quest for racial reckoning, an unstable economy, and intense climate change are all major realities in this decade. Also looming large over the entire decade will be COVID-19 and its impact on everyone. In many ways, the COVID-19 pandemic and its residual effects could likely result in one of the biggest detractors to educational equity since racially segregated schools. Disparate outcomes in educational experiences became even wider in the face of school closures, disproportionate death, and grief in particular communities, and ongoing debates about masks, vaccinations, and virtual learning will reverberate for years to come. Increasing data points continue to emerge, highlighting how much all students regressed academically during the pandemic but that those who were already on the fringes suffered even further erosion in academic gains. The mantra of education as the proverbial equalizer has come into serious question over the past three years. In many ways, COVID-19 exposed deep-seated inequities that have plagued the nation for decades, and at a time when the nation's schools are more racially and culturally diverse than ever before, the consequences have national ramifications for the largest segments of the student population (low-income, English learners, students of color), and this is why we need equity now. Furthermore, having students of color, a disproportionate number of whom happen to be low-income, has major implications for the future of the nation. The issues faced in education today are not Black problems, white problems, Latinx problems, or poor people's problems. They are American problems and will require a national effort to get this done right—to close opportunity gaps, increase equity in schools, and ensure that every student has access to a high-quality education. With issues such as climate change, polarizing politics, a volatile yet new economy, inflation, and increased homelessness and hopelessness all becoming relevant in this moment, we need something different. We need a hard reset to seriously contemplate how we create the schools that our students need and deserve. We need a deep reflective state as a nation to better understand, in a moment of increasing

diversity, that the students who are most diverse often face the most social and academic challenges. We must recognize the toxicity that the nation and its schools face from centuries of racism, classism, sexism, and ableism (Benjamin, 2022).

This book makes a call for us not to prioritize equity as our goal but for equity to be our pathway to achieve equality, with all its aims and aspirational focus. However, to achieve educational equity requires a bold, courageous, and unapologetic commitment to advocating for our most vulnerable students. I make the contention that, if you are serious about doing the work of equity, you recognize that this is not for the faint of heart, it is not for the thin-skinned, and it is not for those easily shaken by criticism. If you are doing the work of transformative equity, you must be prepared to be ostracized, denounced, demoted, excluded, and seen as someone who is a problem. Doing the work for those on the margins is not easy. Though it should be lauded, it is the hardest work to do, because the rugged individualism mantra we have been socialized with teaches us to think that people's failures or shortcomings are a result of their own lack of effort, hard work, and decision making. This book operates from the standpoint that systems and structures, not only individual efforts, are the primary explanations for today's widening disparities. Yes, local acts can go a long way in dismantling systems and structures of disadvantage. Thus, it is important to be bold, courageous, and brave when doing equity work. I have often suggested that in doing equity work it is vital for us to make a fundamental shift in our approach to doing this work. It is important for us to move from safe spaces to brave spaces. A *safe space* is ideally one that does not incite judgment based on identity or experience, where the expression of both can exist and be affirmed without fear of repercussion and without the pressure to educate. While learning may occur in these spaces, the ultimate goal is to provide support. Safe spaces are vital because they require respect, cordiality, and decency. The challenge is that we have often remained in the safe space too long. Many people are conflict averse and do not want to have hard conversations about why students fail in schools every year. Our willingness to stay safe and play nice is making us complicit in student failure. If we want equity now, we need to make a move to a bolder, more necessary space, or what I refer to as a brave space. A *brave space* encourages honest, sustained, and critical dialogue. Such dialogue requires recognizing our differences and holding ourselves, and each person, accountable to do the work of sharing experiences and coming to new understandings about our current realities in schools—a feat that's often hard and typically uncomfortable. Brave spaces are hard because they require vulnerability, self-reflection, and

ultimately action. Brave spaces also require us to have hard discussions with people who we work with, and may even like, but who we see inflicting harm on students. Figure I.1 lists the elements of both safe and brave spaces. One of the key elements of equity in action is that school leaders, board members, superintendents, classroom teachers, and other school personnel must be prepared to have challenging dialogues about the attitudes, values, and beliefs that serve as barriers to creating educational equity. The discussions that are needed must be centered on root causes of why disparities persist and, most importantly, what role we all can play in creating welcoming, affirming, responsive, and rigorous classrooms and schools. This book seeks to be solutions oriented about what can be done to make equity a reality.

FIGURE I.1 • The Elements of Safe and Brave Spaces

SAFE SPACES	BRAVE SPACES
Cordial, respectful, congenial	Respectful, but challenging at times
Avoid confrontation	Encourage respectful differences of opinions
Evade difficult conversations	Lean into difficult conversations
Comfort is priority	Discomfort creates opportunity for growth and transformation
Goal is support	Goal is to create equitable spaces

This book asks readers to lean into brave spaces to create the schools that so many of our students desperately need. We need equity now. Creating brave spaces in schools means that we cannot avoid topics about institutional and individual acts of racism that occur in schools and create irreparable harm for many students of color. It also means that we cannot avoid uneasy discussions about gender inequities, homophobia, and transphobia that are often rampant in certain schools and classrooms. The same thing can be said about deficit-based beliefs and behaviors that are directed toward students who are growing up in poverty that only center on what those students cannot do, and what they do not have, and fail to see their promise and potential. Schools cannot improve and become equity centered until brave spaces become a normal part of school culture. Adults have to become comfortable being uncomfortable in certain spaces if we are to attain equity-centered schools. Frequently, adult comfort supersedes students' well-being.

If we cannot be uncomfortable when discussing ways that we may be reinjuring students, then we have larger challenges. I often ask, “What is our fear in being uncomfortable?” Why can’t we experience what is so common for countless students in our schools? The reality is that many students are uncomfortable in our schools every day and have been so for years. They are uncomfortable because of their race, gender identity, language, ability, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, and other identities that we have not affirmed, or because we have not created schools that will support them for their unique identities. Hence, adult discomfort to create greater student comfort and inclusion is the least that we can do if we are focused on getting this work done. In many schools today, adult comfort supersedes students’ well-being, which is unacceptable. We can and must do better. All of us. Every educator has room for growth and the ability to better support students. The work is difficult and challenging at times, but the outcomes can be immensely rewarding, and the potential transformation and results are well worth the sacrifice.

MOVING EQUITY FORWARD FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE

This book makes the call that equity-based approaches need to be embedded in all of our efforts as educators at all levels. We need equity now. Our students deserve it, and I believe that we can create and sustain equity-centered schools. The book seeks to lay out ideas, practices, policies, and strategies that can help us to obtain that goal. In Chapter 1, I lay out a call of what equity is, and why it matters. I offer definitional delineations between equity and equality and make a case that equity is in line with core democratic values, such as righteousness, fairness, and inclusion, which we purport to live by in a free and fair society. I also discuss the equity framework that will guide this book and be referenced throughout, the importance of justice, acknowledging and repairing past harms, and inclusivity. In Chapter 2, I make a case for what districtwide equity can look like. When considering equity at what I call the 30,000-foot aerial view, it is essential to examine structural factors such as per-pupil funding, hiring practices, promotional opportunities, policies and procedures, and leadership structures that set the tone for the entire district. In Chapter 2, I also lay out core questions and considerations that superintendents, board members, and district leaders should be continuously asking. I frequently am asked to come and talk to various school districts about equity-related concerns. I typically hear from teachers and staff: “This is a training that our leaders at the district need,”

or “Why aren’t our board members and the superintendent’s team here for this?” In short, school districts cannot maximize their impact on students unless all hands are on deck, and it starts with those at the top, namely district leadership, which must embody equity if it is to be enacted at the school level. Chapter 3 will detail what schoolwide equity can look like now. Similar to the work of districts, there are efforts that school-level leaders can take when it comes to creating equitable outcomes. School personnel with an equity-based focus need to think about how they inspire each other, how they can create conditions for equitable practices to flourish, and how they can engage in real courageous conversations with colleagues about diversity, equity, and inclusion. Moreover, equity-based leaders need to also think about how they can work with their staffs to become more culturally responsive with their practices, and how to build an equity-centered culture at the school and be intentional about engaging families and caregivers in an equitable fashion. Chapter 4 will lay out approaches that specifically address what role school leaders can play in achieving equity. Leaders provide an important foundation for teachers and students to be successful. Building leaders are vital in setting a tone, building a culture, and creating the type of environments for everyone to thrive. To that end, how can leaders be instructional leaders, building managers, and innovative leaders with equity at the center of all their efforts? In Chapter 4, I lay out important characteristics of equity-based leadership that can prove valuable for all school- and building-level leaders. In Chapter 5, I talk about equity at the classroom level. Even if the school- and district-level efforts fall short in creating an ecosystem that allows equity to thrive, teachers can still be instrumental in creating equitable learning opportunities in their classroom. While acknowledging the challenges that come when schools are not right, teachers still have significant power when it comes to relationships, expectations, curriculum, instruction, assessment, and classroom climate that can help or harm students. In Chapter 5, I also identify essential practices, strategies, and resources that teachers can think about and implement. Chapter 6 speaks to one of the more important yet overlooked aspects of equity, which is family and parent/caregiver engagement in schools. Parents/caregivers are essential partners in the educational enterprise for students, and as a result, schools need to rethink how to engage parents and caregivers. Among the issues addressed in this chapter is being mindful of who our parents and caregivers are. What do parents/caregivers want most from schools and teachers? How can schools move beyond superficial aspects of parent/caregiver involvement to a more robust engagement with them that sees them as knowledgeable, resourceful, and equal

partners in the education of young people? Finally, in Chapter 7, I discuss equity-based ways to examine, analyze, and understand data with an equity lens. Given the fact that districts are being provided access to more data than ever before, what are rubrics or templates that leaders and teachers can use to make the most sense of the data to inform their practices, policies, and procedures? Data-informed decision making continues to be a hot topic for educators at all levels. But whose data and what data counts? However, without an equity lens to make meaning of data, such efforts can only reify current practices that disrupt equity efforts.

There will be three key important theoretical anchors that guide the work of equity now. I will address them more in detail in Chapter 1, but those anchors are (1) justice, (2) recognizing and repairing harm, and (3) belonging. Each chapter will identify ways to address these three anchor points in education policy and practice. Each chapter will conclude with seven questions that can be used for deeper learning in small learning communities. The purpose of the seven questions is to help practitioners, leaders, and parents/caregivers reflect on policies and practices that are most relevant to them as they engage in equity work. The purpose of these questions is also to lead small learning communities, teacher and leader professional development, or just individual introspection. Please use the questions as a guide and a gauge of where you and your school or district are with the work of equity. Finally, each chapter will conclude with seven additional resources and readings that can be used for deepening the knowledge on key concepts for that chapter. The primary audience for this book is school leaders and practitioners. However, the book also has relevance for school board members, district superintendents, school counselors, paraprofessionals, and other school personnel who are focused on achieving educational equity. It is also my intent to not make this book highly prescriptive. I often cringe when asked by people to tell me five things to do to be more equity-minded. I lay out suggestions, strategies, and resources in this book. But I try to stay away from step-by-step “how to” approaches. I do not think equity is achieved that way; every district, every school, and every classroom has its own culture, makeup, and complexities. It is my hope that readers can use this book and apply the information to their unique ecosystem. This book is designed to encourage participation, disagreement, reflection, inquiry, and discussion of educators on important topics that play out in schools every day yet are not often discussed in small learning communities, in staff meetings, or at the district level. It is my hope that this book serves as a guide for resources, supports, knowledge, and strategies that will help educators with their equity walk. It is

essential to remember that not everyone is at the same place along their equity journey. Our goal is not to push those away who are not where we think they should be or where we are in the journey. To the contrary, our schools are better when we call everyone in to be leaders in their equity journey.

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