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Cultivating and Applying Race Equity Mindsets Among K–12 Education Leaders: Key Questions for Reflection

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Overview: The Importance of Race Equity Mindsets

Equity work can be deeply personal and may include unlearning and shifting individual biases, beliefs, and practices. This paper builds on the premise that ongoing self-reflection in equity work is critical, as failing to attend to this internal work may result in education leaders reinforcing the very systems they are seeking to disrupt. And yet, cultivating a personal race equity mindset is not enough to shift entrenched education systems. Leaders committed to equity must work in partnership to apply the same rigorous reflection to the systems in which they operate.

The information and resources in this paper are for K–12 education leaders who are committed to advancing equity by developing their own race equity mindsets and reflecting on the systems in which they operate.[1] It draws on key concepts presented through the Equity Accelerator project, which aims to support California's county offices of education in improving how their whole-child and whole-school efforts align and cohere with a vision of cultivating fundamental and sustainable change to achieve more equitable education systems.

This document offers several sets of reflection questions and ideas to help individuals and groups examine their current systems and begin creating change from within by first identifying their own roles and levers of influence. The long-term goal is to address inequitable impacts — brought about inequitable systems, policies, and practices — on the students whom K–12 education systems serve.

At the core of this document are five sets of key questions that equity leaders in local education agencies and county offices of education can use in group settings as they examine and seek to shift their education systems to be more equitable. The first two sets are for initial high-level examination of current conditions in an education system. The final three sets of questions focus on beginning to undo racial harm and creating opportunities to include more diverse perspectives in an education agency.

[1] **Author's note: This document draws on and was inspired by the ideas of countless leaders in race equity and education, many of whom may be called "people of the global majority" (see "A note on terminology" at the bottom of page 2). The resources cited throughout and at the end of this document capture some of their voices. Specific contributors to this resource include the WestEd Equity Accelerator team of Christina Pate, Jenny Betz, Lauren Trout, and Cherry Hanna; Equity Accelerator Coaches Rachelle Rogers-Ard and Terna Tilley-Gyado; and learning session presenters Trabian Shorters, Erin Browder, and David Lopez.**

Before addressing issues of systemic inequities, it is up to individuals to understand and be committed to continuously reflecting on their own experiences with racism and bias and why achieving racial equity in education systems is of critical and urgent importance. For more information on foundational concepts for such reflection, education leaders may want to consult the following resources before engaging in group discussion about racial equity in their agency:

- Book: **Me and White Supremacy** (Layla Saad)
- Podcast: **Throughline** (National Public Radio)
- Article: **White Supremacy Culture** (Showing Up for Racial Justice)
- Website: **White Noise Collective**
- Resource Compilation: **Anti-Racism Resource List**

How to use this document: Each section of this paper offers a brief explanation of an equity-focused theme, a set of key questions intended for group reflection on that theme, and a description or scenario that briefly conveys possible ways the questions might be used. At the end of the document is a list of related resources for further learning and inquiry.

Leaders may choose to use this document in the context of groups that have already spent time examining inequitable student outcomes or have established a shared commitment to working collectively toward racial equity — groups such as countywide diversity and inclusion teams, cross-departmental groups focused on equity, or multidistrict leadership groups.

The key questions and resources may be considered in a series of meetings, or leaders may pick one or a few of the questions to use as part of a larger conversation on systems improvement; student outcomes; or student, family, and community engagement. There is no set process for introducing or discussing these questions; rather, leaders are encouraged to embed opportunities for reflection and discussion into already-existing meeting structures and norms.

A note on terminology: The Equity Accelerator initiative is committed to using inclusive, asset-based terminology. This paper uses the phrase "of the global majority" to refer to anyone who is Black, Indigenous, non-White, or multiracial. Although these people collectively do constitute a majority of the global population, they have historically been and currently are impacted by systems of oppression and white supremacy in the United States (and elsewhere) and thus hold far less power at structural and systems levels, including in education.

Facilitating a Paradigm Shift

"Every system is perfectly designed to get the results it gets."

— The W. Edwards Deming Institute, n.d.

Changing systems entails a paradigm shift, with leaders at all levels examining the assumptions they and others make about the design and purpose of their work. Such examination can expose problematic gaps between the intent and impact of an agency's work and cause education leaders to reassess how they are serving their primary stakeholders — students and families. Shifting paradigms can introduce opportunities for reimagining the purpose and structure of an education system.

The following questions are intended to encourage individuals to step back from their personal roles and look more generally at their education system, how it is designed, and what outcomes it achieves.

Key Questions

- **What is the purpose of our education system?**
- **Who is it designed to serve, and who does it neglect?**
- **When you reflect on the quote above ("Every system is perfectly designed…"), what do you think are the outcomes our system is designed to achieve?**
- **What might an education system look like when it serves students and communities who have been historically excluded because of systemic oppression?**

One way for a group of education leaders to begin addressing these questions would be to review their agency's mission statement, vision, and values and then to examine available data (including observational or other qualitative data) related to the stated goals of the agency.

For example, leaders might reflect on whether their agency's mission (e.g., cultivate life-long learners who are prepared to be engaged citizens of the world) and related goals (e.g., provide instruction that promotes critical thinking, teamwork, problem-solving, and effective communication) align with the reality of what happens in classrooms and schools. Often, there are notable misalignments between what an education agency says its aims are and the reality of student and staff experiences. If they do not align, why do they not?

The process of asking such questions and examining alignment will often challenge assumptions and raise more questions about how well an education agency is serving its students, especially those of the global majority. Although such reflections may result in discomfort, they provide an opportunity to think about what might be done differently to align everyday practices with the mission and goals of an education agency.

Working Toward Race Equity in Context

> ***"We define equity as the condition that would be achieved if intersectional racism was not a major predictor of people's outcomes."***
>
> **— Rogers-Ard & Knaus, 2020**

Understanding each person's and group's locus of control within a system can help them direct their focus, set goals, and take action.

In county and district offices of education where staff do not have regular opportunities to interact with students, families, or teachers, they may lose sight of how their individual mindsets and behaviors impact student outcomes and experiences. In fact, individuals' beliefs and priorities have profound impact on choices that shape policy and practice, and those choices ultimately trickle down to affect classroom instruction, student experiences, and academic outcomes.

As with considering a paradigm shift, examining potential misalignments in how one's individual and collective work contributes to equity or inequity at the student level can raise discomfort. The following questions are meant to prompt individuals and groups to think about how they can allocate their resources (time, focus, funding) more effectively and explicitly to activities related to equity.

Key Questions

- In our individual and collective work, how often is racial equity a focus?
- Could we be more intentional or explicit in how our work contributes to our vision for racial equity?
- Do we see equitable distribution in terms of how we use our time, resources, and attention to serve students, teachers, and families?
- What do we have direct control over? In what other areas do we have influence?
- Who are our allies, and how can we engage with them to achieve our racial equity goals?

After discussing these questions, a group may notice that although they have a stated goal of working toward equitable student outcomes, most of their time in meetings is spent on compliance or discussing process improvement. Although these are important issues and may ultimately impact equity, the group might find value in setting aside time for explicit discussion on how their work impacts equity or how well they are using available resources to achieve equity outcomes.

Engaging in honest discussion about misalignment between intentions and resources may prompt a group to rethink its meeting agendas or workflow. Finding partners who are equally committed to equity goals may provide opportunities for collaboration and leveraging of shared resources.

Equity Approach 1: Recognize and Name Inequities

> ***"Once we notice, then we can engage.... To be oblivious is to turn ourselves off from humanity"***
>
> **— Glen Singleton, 2013**

Recognizing and, more importantly, naming and challenging bias, inequity, oppression, and injustice are key approaches that can have profound impact. Scrutinizing established norms and routines will often bring to light inequities that lie under the surface, such as dominant culture (National Museum of African American History and Culture, n.d.), deficit thinking (Davis & Museus, 2019), and color-evasiveness (Neville et al., 2013). Addressing these issues head-on requires ongoing and courageous conversations among education leaders.

Key Questions

- Who is involved in making major decisions about policy and practice? Are the people who are most impacted in these decisions invited to provide input or become involved in creating the systems and structures that impact them?
- What inequities are there in your system? How are they connected to student outcomes? *Examples may include the following:*
  - *disproportionate and exclusionary discipline practices*
  - *inequitable approaches to recruiting students to postsecondary institutions*
  - *overly subjective definitions of "defiant" and "disruptive" in school policies*
  - *"below basic" classifications without proper extended learning supports*
  - *inadequate translation services for families who speak languages other than English*
- How can you invite and facilitate bidirectional feedback between those who have traditionally held power in education systems and those who have not?
- What norms currently exist to address uncomfortable topics such as racism and inequitable outcomes?

In looking at data on the impact of school safety measures and how students feel about their school's safety, for example, education leaders might notice obvious differences in White students' experiences and perceptions in comparison to those of students of the global majority. More white students in many schools commonly report feeling safe than do students of the global majority (Nakamoto et al., 2019).

Without clear expectations and norms in place about how to confront and discuss racial disparities in impact, a leadership group reviewing such data may gloss over the findings as "expected" or may simply move on without addressing the problem head-on. Leaders and group facilitators can prepare for participants' tendency to avoid discomfort by having strategies ready, such as using protocols for asking and responding to questions related to the data, intervening when an individual becomes defensive or shows other signs of emotional dysregulation, and being especially mindful of the emotional safety of participants of the global majority who often bear the toll of having to assuage the emotions of their White peers during discussions on race. Leaders may also consider inviting students and other stakeholders to their meetings to share more about their experiences in order to supplement the data and deepen participants' understanding and commitment to addressing the problems.

Equity Approach 2: Center Race

Leadership, courage, and willingness to share power are necessary to co-design new approaches to teaching and learning alongside those most negatively impacted by the current system.

— BELE Network, 2020

For White education leaders, centering race includes prioritizing the voices of people of the global majority over their own experiences and perspective. With power dynamics often at play, examining how those dynamics impact conversations and feedback can be important. Are those in power providing the support and best conditions for the emotional safety of historically marginalized staff, students, and families so that those individuals are able to share honestly about their experiences?

Education leaders aiming to center race may face backlash at the idea of focusing on one group to the perceived exclusion of others (such as when people respond to "Black Lives Matter" with "All Lives Matter" or "Blue Lives Matter"). It may be helpful to have a preplanned response to such reactions, including a strong rebuttal to the idea that racial equity must come at the expense of others. What centering race will do is call into question the unearned privileges of dominant groups and, hopefully, introduce conversations on how to redistribute power and privilege to be shared equally.

Key Questions

- What would it look and feel like to center the experiences of students, teachers, and families of the global majority in your agency?
- Specific to centering the voices and experiences of *students* of the global majority, what barriers exist, and how might they be overcome?
- What data are available to center voices of the global majority? How are those data currently being used, and how might their use expand your organization's thinking on the issues these stakeholders face?
- As a leader, how can you use your power and influence to cede the floor to others whose voices have tended to go unheard?

A district or county office might decide to host a series of focus groups to understand how a new professional development program for teachers has impacted learning and school culture. As they plan to invite participants and host these focus groups, staff might consider — and continuously reevaluate — how they will ensure feedback from the full range of students and staff impacted. Being mindful of barriers to authentic participation can help the group plan to overcome them; for example, considering power dynamics between staff and students that may make it difficult for students to speak up or challenge adults' perspectives may lead the group to plan carefully for supporting students' emotional safety during feedback sessions.

Furthermore, planning, sharing, and following through on how information from the focus groups will be used in decision-making is crucial. Listening to diverse voices is just the start; leaders should also be prepared to act on what they hear, even if the focus groups' messages run contrary to previous plans or assumptions.

Equity Approach 3: Examine and Reframe Dominant Narratives

> ***"[C]onsider whether the story represents the fullness of a person or a people, or whether it disempowers them or perpetuates problematic stereotypes."***
>
> **— Dena Simmons, 2017**

Problems or challenges are all too easily framed in terms of individual or community deficits. Students are "disengaged," teachers are "stretched thin," and families are "hard to reach" — these are all examples of using descriptors that focus on shortcomings, which often ends up blaming individuals rather than problematic systems. Reframing dominant narratives begins with recognizing assets, which can introduce opportunities to build on the strengths of staff, students, and families.

Challenging dominant narratives can not only strengthen an organization's services, it can also shift the focus from "doing for" to "doing with." This shift can have profound impacts on outcomes because the solutions will be designed with input from those most affected.

Key Questions

- How does your organization describe the challenges that students, teachers, and families face? Are narratives focused on individual deficits or societal challenges?
- Where do the dominant narratives come from, and what purpose do they serve?
- How might framing systemic issues as individual or interpersonal problems/dynamics impact how you address the issues?
- What overlooked assets exist among your stakeholders, and how might they be accessed or built up?
- How can you provide others with opportunities to learn about and experience the assets of those they are serving?

One way to understand the assets of a group or community is to create a list or graphic representation. The assets can be physical spaces (for example, churches or community centers); characteristics (such as a community's tendencies to help those in need, come up with innovative solutions to problems, or cultivate strong family ties); or other positive behaviors, mindsets, or resources. Further explanation of "Asset Mapping" as well as related resources and ideas for activities are available from the Community Tool Box (Berkowitz & Wadud, n.d.) and the Advancement Project – Healthy City Community Research Lab (Burns et al., 2012).

Simply reframing how one views a group or community can be an important first step in identifying how they can be an integral part of solutions to improve schools, student and staff experiences, and more. For example, leaders who want to address issues of low attendance among a group of students who live in the same neighborhood might engage with the existing resources in that neighborhood to take a shared problem-solving approach. Working with community assets such as a Boys and Girls Club or informal parent groups to support attendance may yield very different — and more effective — solutions than if the leaders were to come up with solutions on their own.

What Is Next: Action Planning

After critically examining your education system and gaining insights into how to advance racial equity, it is time to take action. There are many excellent resources available for next steps. Some of these include the following:

- Data Equity Walk Toolkit (from Education Trust-West)
- Identifying the Root Cause of Disproportionality (from New York University Metropolitan Center for Research on Equity and the Transformation of Schools, Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development)

For Further Reading

On Paradigm Shifts

- Book: The Practice of Adaptive Leadership: Tools and Tactics for Changing Your Organization and the World (Ronald Heifetz, Alexander Grashow, & Marty Linsky)
- Article: So You Think You're an Anti-Racist? Ideological Adjustments for Well-Meaning White Educators (Equity Literacy Institute)
- Training and Resources: Liberatory Design

On Working Toward Racial Equity in Context

- Book: Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive Through the Dangers of Leading (Ronald Heifetz & Martin Linsky)
- Research Article: "But What Can I Do?": Three Necessary Tensions in Teaching Teachers About Race (Mica Pollock, Sherry Deckman, Meredith Mira, & Carla Shalaby)
- National Equity Project: The Lens of Systemic Oppression
- Equity in the Center: Race Equity Cycle Pulse Check

On Recognizing and Naming Inequities

- Book: Schooltalk: Rethinking What We Say About and To Students Every Day (Mica Pollock)
- Video: Courageous Conversations About Race (Glen Singleton)
- Video: The Exceptional Negro: Fighting to be Seen in a Colorblind World (Traci Ellis)
- Article: Don't Talk about Implicit Bias Without Talking about Structural Racism (National Equity Project)
- Blog: Color Brave Space — How to Run a Better Equity Focused Meeting (Fakequity)

On Centering Race

- Presentation Slides: The Bele Framework Executive Summary (BELE Network)
- Publication: Awake to Woke to Work: Building a Race Equity Culture (Equity in the Center)
- Report: A Toolkit for Centering Racial Equity Throughout Data Integration (Actionable Intelligence for Social Policy)
- Report: The "New Racism" of K–12 Schools: Centering Critical Research on Racism (Rita Kohli, Marcos Pizarro, & Arturo Nevárez)

On Examining and Reframing Dominant Narratives

- Report: Social, Emotional, and Academic Development Through an Equity Lens (The Education Trust)
- Book: Reaching and Teaching Students in Poverty (Paul C. Gorski)
- Article: How to Change the Story about Students of Color (Dena Simmons)
- Training and Resources: Asset-Framing (BMe Community)
- Report: Introduction: Power and Narrative (Shari Daya & Lisa Lau)
- Guide: Anti-Racist Decolonizing Framework for Talking About and Describing Young People (American Friends Service Committee)

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