

Special Edition

Equity in Action: A Long Term Struggle



“We must stop thinking that superficial programs and interventions are going to create an equitable and just school system or society.”

- Jim Scheurich



Introduction

Equity in Action

This special edition of *Equity Dispatch* highlights the critical call-to-action presented by keynote speaker Dr. James “Jim” Scheurich at the MAP Center’s 2018 Equity Leaders Institute (ELI), entitled *Equity in Action: Transforming Education Systems through Democratic, Critical, and Contextual Inquiry*. In his talk, Dr. Scheurich embodied the 2018 ELI’s grounding assertions (Paris & Alim, 2014, p. 86):

- “[As educators] committed to educational justice, [we approach our reflections, discussions and work today] with the understanding that the languages, literacies, histories, and cultural ways of [people from minoritized communities based on race, sex, national origin, religion or dis/abilities] are not pathological.
- Beginning with this understanding—an understanding fought for across the centuries—allows us to see the fallacy of measuring [students] solely against the White, middle-class, [Judeo-Christian, non-disabled] norms of knowing and being that continue to dominate notions of educational achievement.
- In our work here we are committed to envisioning and [creating learning environments] that are not filtered through a lens of contempt and pity (e.g., the “achievement gap”) but, rather, are centered on contending in complex ways with the rich and innovative linguistic, literate, and cultural practices of Indigenous American, African American, Latina/o, Asian American, Pacific Islander, and other youth and communities of color [with and without dis/abilities].”

Appropriately, this installment of *Equity Dispatch* is ahead of the MAP Center’s 2019 ELI, *Moving Beyond Critical Reflection to Critical Action: Policy and School Governance*. We appreciate and are honored to be able to share Dr. Scheurich’s keynote with our wider audience; we hope that the urgency in his words resonates with every individual with ties and connections to our educational systems.



Keynote Speech

Sisters and Brothers in the Struggle

Dr. Jim Scheurich

I want to welcome you to IUPUI, the IUPUI School of Education, the Great Lakes Equity Center, and the Fall 2018 Equity Leaders Institute.

It is my understanding that I have the honor of being able to talk with a group of individuals fully committed to creating an equitable and just educational system and an equitable and just society. It

is my understanding that you all are doing equity and justice work in all different kinds of education-related spaces.

In other words, with my own decades-long involvement in equity and justice struggles, you are my kind of people, the ones who stand shoulder to shoulder, day after day, doing the hard equity and justice work on the ground. Though each of us may not know most of the others here, it is truly important that we recognize and value that we are not alone, that there are many others just like us doing this difficult work. We need to draw strength and sustenance from that recognition that we are together in the struggle for what Martin Luther King called “the beloved community,” that is, a loving, inclusive world rather than a world of hatred, division, bias, and discrimination.

In this regard, we always need to remind ourselves that the struggle we participate in today has been going on since Europeans came to this land. We have many ancestors in the struggle for equity and justice. The Indigenous people whose land we are on right this moment fought against the theft of their lands and the genocide that destroyed 85% of them.

Individuals of all races fought against slavery, the theft of lands in Texas and the Southwest, Jim Crow, the new Jim Crow, the long term exploitation of people of Color, and the continued racism in our schools and society. All kinds of folks have long fought against sexism and misogyny, against homophobia and heteronormativity, and against the many permutations



of ableism. Many have also long fought against the destructions of capitalism with its deeply embedded racial caste system and its exploitation of workers through wages that will not sustain life. All of these individuals who have fought in any or many of these struggles are our equity and justice ancestors. We must regularly pay homage to them and draw sustenance from their long term commitment and persistence. It is the road they built that we are walking on and trying to extend for those who come after us.

We also must constantly remind ourselves that this is a long term struggle. As our ancestors have said many times, this road will not be completed in our lifetimes. We must understand that we will spend our entire lives working to further justice and equity, pushing forward toward the beloved community. I know this recognition can be disheartening. We all want to move into the beloved community tomorrow. I certainly do. But that is not going to happen. The history of this country clearly communicates to us that the struggle for equity and justice is a long and hard one with many defeats and failures. Our ancestors in the struggle for equity and justice tell us the same.

Understand that you will not see the Promised Land in your lifetime.

It is important, then, to consider what we must do to sustain ourselves for a lifetime of struggle. If we ignore this issue, we can easily become a struggle dropout as we can get to the point where we just cannot take the difficulties, the conflicts, the failures, the pain of another Black man murdered with impunity by police, another Indigenous woman raped and murdered and no one brought to justice, another woman sexually abused by a powerful man, another student of Color experiencing failure in

our schools. As the inequities and injustices we face are large, horrendous, and devastating, we need sustenance for a lifetime of struggle.



I cannot tell you what kind of sustenance will work for you, but I do know you must have some to continue over decades. I can, though, tell you some of mine. For me, the struggle for equity and justice is most fundamentally spiritual. Inequity and injustice are a fundamental violation of the Great Spirit, which means, for me, that I must live under the imperative of addressing and eliminating these violations. But my spirituality does not just call me to the barricades, it is also central to sustaining me. I feel I am part of something much larger than myself, something holy and sacred, something whose intention is the beloved community. I also pray, meditate, exercise, and eat healthy food. All of these are a necessity for maintaining myself. Finally, it is incredibly important to have friends, relatives, and loved ones who support you and whom you support. None of us can survive

doing this alone.

The final area I want to address is what we face in our equity and justice work. In my perspective, we often under-estimate the depths of the inequity and injustice we face. Let's take racism, as one area, though we could easily focus on gender, class, sexuality, disability, etc. or the intersections of these. I would suggest that k12 schools are deeply racist institutions that are highly resistant to reform. Indeed, I would suggest that most of our efforts to make schools equitable and just have failed with the most blatant evidence being that school success, however that is defined, continues nationally to overwhelmingly favor middleclass white children and their families and to overwhelmingly disfavor children of Color and their families. James Banks and Christine Sleeter thought that multicultural education was going to be a revolution that brought equity and justice to the schooling of children of Color. It did not. It got watered down, absorbed, assimilated, with every teacher supposedly incorporating multiculturalism, but no change in the apartheid of school success. The same result is happening to culturally relevant pedagogy.

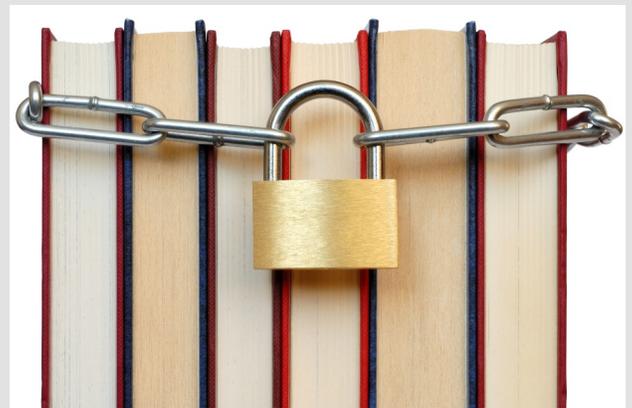
In addition, if we look at the research in many different areas of k12 schooling, we see the same pattern of racism. Based on years of careful research, Skiba and others have concluded that racism is the main cause of discipline disparities and the discipline to prison pipeline, and a huge Texas study of just under a million showed that the discipline to prison pipeline is not a metaphor; it is a concrete, specifiable process schools engage in. Ford, Artiles, and King Thorius have shown the same in special education. Ford and others have shown the same in AP courses and gifted and talented. The same is true in teacher quality distribution. The upper middle class white students, on average, get the highest quality teachers, and students of Color from low income families, on average, get the lowest quality, including new teachers, high teacher mobility, and more teachers



teaching outside their expertise. We have persistent evidence of the conscious and unconscious racial bias, deficit thinking, and what Bonilla-Silva has called Color-blind racism among educators. We have deep ignorance of the cultures of students and their families that 10-15 hours of professional development is not going to change. We have the racial and economic geography of the schooling of children of Color that was created by corporate, city, state, and federal government policies and practices. We have the differences in resources and buildings between urban schools filled with students of Color and upper middle class suburban schools filled with white children.

I would go further and suggest that the entire culture and structure of k12 schooling only fits the white children of educated professionals. What these white children get at home matches what happens at school while children of other cultures do not find a match when they go to school; thus, to be successful children of Color have to learn and assimilate to the culture of white educated professionals. Indeed, I would suggest that conventional methods of teaching, the authority structure of schools, the setup of classrooms, the curriculum, etc. all are matches to the culture of white educated professionals.

Let's take the k12 curriculum. Our k12 curriculum does not tell the truth of the genocide and land theft of the Indigenous and the cold brutality and greed of the Europeans driving that genocide and land theft. Our k12 curriculum does not tell the truth about slavery and the cold brutality and greed of the whites benefiting from slavery. Our curriculum does not tell the truth of how the whole country, both North and South, became rich and powerful on the backs of Black slaves. Our



Our k12 curriculum does not tell the truth about the old Jim Crow or the new Jim Crow; about the Klan and the hangings of Black folk, particularly Black men; about the persistent economic exploitation of communities of Color; and about the government-driven segregation of communities of Color in under-resourced geographical areas. Our k12 curriculum does not tell the truth about how most middle class white families housing-based wealth is the product of a federal government program that specifically excluded Black folks and thus does not teach our children that the higher wealth of middleclass whites was not a function of them being better or working harder but of a racist governmental program. Thus, our k12 curriculum is a white wash that lifts up white children, which of course helps them succeed in schooling made for them, and that hurts children of Color, which of course helps them fail at schooling. Thus, inequitable schooling outcomes are not a function of children of Color learning less; they are the direct function of a racist institution.

Of course, schools are not alone in this racism. Social science research shows the same in law enforcement, housing, higher education, media, wealth, medicine and health, etc. Virtually, all of our society's institutional areas evidence deep racism. Thus, we live in a deeply racist society that influences virtually all aspects of our lives. For example, I would suggest that we white people, myself included, live in a different world, a different reality, than do folks of Color. Just like the culture, structure, and processes of schooling are built for professional class white people, our whole society is built that way. The social world we white people inhabit fits us, was made for us. In contrast, the social world of people of Color does not fit them; instead, it is persistently negative

toward them in multifarious ways. As a white person, daily I walk through a world made for my whiteness; it supports me, takes care of me, values me. It means my salary is likely higher; I likely get more fame points: what I say gets more attention than if a person of Color says the same, all of which tends to create a kind of unconscious arrogance and ignorance among us white people, which invariably causes damage to people of Color since we white people tend to have much more power at all institutional levels. Just like those federal housing loans gave white people a boost and subtracted from people of Color; our culture, our world, our reality, does the same.

These words I say may unsettle some of you, but I am not sorry if I have. We all need to be constantly unsettled if we are to do authentic equity and justice work. I have made these tough comments here near the end of my talk because we who are the warriors for equity and justice must understand what we really face. We must understand the depths of the inequity and injustice if we are going to do real work on building the beloved community. We must stop thinking that superficial programs and interventions are going to create an equitable and just school system or society. As we white people are generally in the power seat, we must engage our conscious and unconscious participation in white racism in much more depth and honesty than we ever have. Each of us who occupy the position of privilege in any area of inequity and injustice must do the same. We men must engage our conscious and unconscious participation in sexism and misogyny. Heterosexuals must engage their conscious and unconscious participation in heterosexism and homophobia. We of the educated class must engage our conscious and unconscious participation in classism. We who are temporarily able must engage our conscious and unconscious participation in ableism in much more depth and honesty than we ever have.

We must understand that we will not see the Promised Land, but we might make it possible for our progeny to get there. We must prepare to endure the long haul.

I will end, then, with some reminders:

Please recognize that those of you who are here together are sisters and brothers in the struggle together.

Also, we must remember that we have many equity and justice ancestors we must honor. They sacrificed, worked in the face of impossibilities, and often died for us. They carried us to this point; they built the road we are working on. Let's match their effort, commitment, and persistence.

We must remember that we are in a long term struggle. We must understand that we will not see the Promised Land, but we might make it possible for our progeny to get there. We must prepare to endure the long haul.

Because of this, we must each figure out how to sustain ourselves. If we ignore this, we will fall down and be an equity and justice drop out because we have worn ourselves out. We often think we just don't have time, but we must make time if we want to persist and endure. We must be honest with each other about the size and horror of the inequity and injustice we face. We must quit thinking superficial programs and interventions will make a significant, long-term difference. And, those of us

who occupy various positions of privilege must work hard and harder on our own complicity in inequity and injustice.

Our goal to me is the beloved community, a world of love and appreciation for all people. An educational system that loves and appreciates every child. An educational system that sees every child as a genius of one sort or another. I believe that us being here together is part of that effort. I believe the creation of the beloved community is the struggle you all have committed to. Thus, I am deeply honored that you all have been willing to listen to me for a few minutes. I truly hope that some of what I have said is helpful and that it supports you and the equity and justice work you are doing.

As you continue into the institute today and tomorrow, I recommend honest, candid, perhaps even difficult conversations and discussions. Let's push each other AND support each other. Let's be honest, open, and vulnerable with each other. Let's not avoid the difficult issues. To me, my sisters and brothers, this path is the truly loving way.

Thank you.

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About the Author

James "Jim" Scheurich, Ph.D.



Dr. Jim Scheurich was a professor at the University of Texas at Austin for 12 years and at Texas A&M University for 8 years, and moved to Indiana University-Indianapolis (IUPUI) in 2012. He is an anti-racist, community activist scholar committed to addressing the institutional and structural inequities and injustices in

educational and community contexts. His research interests include anti-racism, equity, and inclusion in schools and communities. For over 15 years, he has been the editor of the *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, serves on several research journal editorial boards, has published over fifty articles in research journals, and has authored or co-authored eight books, including *Leadership for Equity and Excellence* and *Using Equity Audits to Create Equitable and Excellent Schools*. In 2006, he received the Master Professor Award and in 2012 the Scribner Mentoring Award, both from UCEA, the premier national research organization in educational leadership. Furthermore, he has chaired to completion 41 dissertations, sat on over 100 dissertation committees, and had 38 of his students become university professors, including 17 he chaired.

Meet the Authors

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Recommended citation: Scheurich, J. (2019). Equity in action: A long term struggle. *Equity Dispatch*. Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center (MAP EAC).

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