Toward Equitable Schools:

Reflections and Challenges

Elizabeth C. Reilly
Pepperdine University

Abstract: To engage in the goal of equity requires a certain amount of rage in one's belly. Understanding the context in which we are presently situated regarding our successes and challenges to achieve equity and social justice can serve to inform our future actions as educational leaders.

From Where We Have Come

> *For we live in what has been handed down to us, and this is not just a specific region of our experience of the world, specifically what we call the "cultural tradition"…No, it is the world itself which is communicatively experienced and continually entrusted to us as an infinitely open task. It is never the world as it was on its first day, but as it has come down to us.*
>
> —Hans-Georg Gadamer

In *Other People's Children*, Lisa Delpit (1996) asserts that if we are to address issues of equity and social justice in schools, we must start by listening. By paving the way to hear the voices of many perspectives, the "silenced dialogue" may become authentic conversation (p.24). To ap-

proach this notion of silenced dialogue, she explicates several aspects of the culture of power that are present in classrooms. Codes and rules exist for entering into a culture which those in power have established. Additionally, those with the power are unaware or unwilling to acknowledge their power and those without this power are unaware of the cultural norms in the first place. The everyday happenings of the classroom and the school, then, could look like this:

> "I was in second grade and it was time to use the headsets for reading. I noticed that the teacher's aide would grab the headsets from a box, but would reach for a headset from the drawer for the only African-American student. I knew that something about that was not right…. [And] my quest to achieve social justice began."
>
> "I knew that I was different from the other kids in school because I spoke a language that others did not….In the 1970s the greatest evil empire was the USSR and all those associated with that country were considered the enemy. I was not conflicted by these teachings because I had parents who had escaped Stalin's wrath. I was not the enemy. I came from a family that was a victim of Communism [and yet] I was not supported by my counselor who…believed that I was inferior because of my bilingualism. I truly wanted to take college bound classes, but [he] kept signing me up for basic classes."
>
> "One day I realized I was the only Asian [in the school]. That was when the Bruce Lee and ching chong jokes started. Nothing was done when I told the teacher other than her telling me, 'They don't understand you; you're different.'"

These stories do not come from other people's children. They come from my students who at the master's level seek to obtain their first administrative positions and from my doctoral students who are veteran school leaders. They suggest strong instantiation for Delpit's principles and echo Freire's notion of banking education which "inhibits creativity and domesticates (although it cannot completely destroy) the *intentionality* of consciousness by isolating consciousness from the world, thereby denying people their ontological and historical vocation of becoming more fully human (pp. 83-4)." In essence, educational pedagogy that silences voices is education that makes no room for equity and ultimately, no opportunity for emancipation.

It is not a huge stretch to suggest that these stories exist and recur beyond the classroom—in the school, the school district, the parent-teacher association, and with the boards of education. Leading an organization from a banking perspective, then, systemically perpetuates a culture where voices are silent or silenced. The undercurrent—the thread, if you will—of my work with my students is an ongoing conver-

sation about equity and social justice. I tell my students that you cannot engage in the quest for equity without some small amount of rage in your belly. It is necessary to impel you forward.

Reflections on the Authors' Contributions

> *"The best thing for being sad," replied Merlin..."is to learn something. That is the only thing that never fails.... That is the only thing which the mind can never exhaust, never alienate, never be tortured by, never fear or distrust, and never dream of regretting. Learning is the thing for you."*
>
> —T. H. White

The articles in this volume should impel us forward. The authors present a variety of perspectives on the state of the school and the state of the school or college of education that serve to situate us within the context of the state of education at present. From the new insights they offer for our consideration, we may distill two principal themes that can inform our future work. First, we must strive continually to even the playing field so that all children might benefit from the system we have created. Second, school leadership is the lynchpin for achieving this goal and we must persevere in our efforts to achieve excellence in the programs we offer.

Barbara and Krovitz begin the conversation by arguing that closing the achievement gap is not the only matter we must address when working toward equity. They suggest that to achieve an equity agenda, principals must be able to address critical and often uncomfortable issues of race. Smith adds to the discussion with additional substantiation for the pervasive lack of understanding of children of color and of poverty and suggests that to engage the voices of the community is to begin the process of meaningful change. She further identifies a number of strategies that culturally competent leaders may incorporate into the execution of their school visions.

While Barbara, Krovitz, and Smith advocate for new perspectives and new strategies to confront equity issues, Garcia examines the sustainability of reform efforts and why with high frequency, they cease to exist. He presents skill sets necessary for leaders to sustain reform and provides suggestions for how schools and colleges of education may support awareness and use of these abilities. So then, an additional part of the conversation must be about how we can sustain reform efforts aimed at achieving the equity agenda.

A growing body of literature suggests the substantial impact that preschool has on issues of equity and on circumventing many of the problems that K-12 educators assume are inevitable. Slaby, Loucks, and

Stelwagon present a case study of a district where universal preschool was established. This opportunity permitted the analysis of the impact of this program on children's achievement in subsequent school years in comparison to children who did not participate in preschool. The results suggested that students who participated in preschool attended school more regularly, experienced greater academic achievement, and had a higher level of parent involvement in the life of the school. Clearly, this strategy of early prevention and intervention holds promise for further inquiry as an important way to address equity and social justice.

In seeking to present ways that administrators may lead school improvement, Storms and Gordon provide a segue from earlier articles focusing principally on the schools themselves by demonstrating how one university's focus on collaborative inquiry sought to create a bridge between theory and practice by encouraging candidates to apply inquiry principles and methodologies for engaging in school reform in situ by addressing an actual issue or problem. While the case study method does present limitations, the authors suggest that presenting students with an opportunity to engage in research for which there is appreciable benefit within their professional settings provides rewards that can extend far beyond their formal schooling.

Standards are becoming a way of life in education. We have curriculum standards, assessment standards, teaching standards, and administrative standards, among them. The *Standards for Advanced Programs in Educational Leadership* are becoming that by which we gauge the quality of and determine the content for educational leadership programs across the country. Some states, such as California, have modified the standards in small ways to make them their own. Schulte and Kowal continue the focus on the school or college of education by seeking to validate an instrument that identifies the dispositions of effective school leaders based on those administrative standards. They suggest that this instrument can provide formative data to program faculty and other decision-makers to meet both individual student needs and larger program needs.

Adding to the conversation about administrative standards, Oliver presents a longitudinal trend study to ascertain information regarding the professional development of K-12 assistant principals. In seeking to benefit the ongoing learning of these co-leaders of our schools, he bases a data gathering instrument on the standards. This effort not only provides rich data regarding these administrators' needs, but provides ongoing authentication and justification for their use of the standards well beyond their formal leadership preparation courses and programs. As online technology becomes an integral part of educational preparation, study into its benefits or liabilities must broaden. The unique

characteristics of the online communities of two student cohorts provide the backdrop for Choi, Browne-Ferrigno, and Muth's work as they examine students' interactions with one another. The students' online interactions suggest learning benefits such as learning cooperatively, both seeking and providing a variety of types of support, and a way to reflect on work undertaken and work completed. Questions remain, however, as to potential liabilities and the authors suggest that this area of inquiry is rich with possibilities for the future.

While previous authors examined some of the specifics of educational leadership programs, our concluding article steps beyond the individual trees and takes a critical look at the forest. Twale and Place challenge some of the cherished structures of the academy and suggest that if we wish K-12 school systems to change, then we too must change. Further, they assert that our programs must emulate the beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors we expect of our students as educational leaders. By using a model that addresses collegiate ideology/ethos, academic culture, mission statement, managerial climate, and organizational structure, we may assess our programs. In the last analysis, not only should we strive for equity and social justice in our K-12 schools, but we should seek these within academe with equal fervor.

Looking Toward the Future

> *There may be times when we are powerless to prevent injustice, but there must never be a time when we fail to protest.*
>
> —Elie Wiesel

In the mid-19th century, Tocqueville (in Stone & Mennell, 1980) wrote in his prophesy that in the United States of America "the passion for equality penetrates on every side into men's hearts, expands there, and fills them entirely (p. 352)." Nearly 150 years later Kozol (1991) reminds us that "we are children only once; and after those few years are gone, there is no second chance to make amends. In this respect, the consequences of unequal education have a terrible finality (p. 180)." Is there congruence between that which we claim to believe and that on which we dare to act? I offer several suggestions to not only make amends, but to make it different and to make it better.

1. *Research.* Include the voices of our children and of a broad spectrum of individuals in our work. Scholarly endeavors must not be void of the words of those whom we seek to help.

2. *Teaching.* Seek to integrate issues of equity and social justice

into those subjects that you teach. For example, if you are presenting topics of teaching and learning to aspiring administrators, engage in dialogue about how traditional curricular approaches serve to advance and/or hinder the equity agenda.

3. Communities of Practice. Take the messages from this journal and begin a conversation with a colleague, a parent, a staff member, a board member, and a member of a community organization. Offer to present at a union meeting, to your service organization, to the parent-teacher group, or to the board of education.

4. Advocacy. Use the power of your position as an educator to influence educational policy that places equity and social justice at the center and addresses in substantive ways the issues presented in these articles.

If we have done our job, then this year's CAPEA Journal has provided food for the intellect and perhaps even a bit of rage in the belly. Let the messages of fellow educators presented within these pages serve to remind us that "they" are in truth "we," and that other people's children are everyone's children.

References

Delpit, L. (1996). *Other people's children: Cultural conflict in the classroom*. New York: The New Press.

Friere, P. (2000). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*, 30th anniversary ed. New York: Continuum.

Gadamer, H. G. (1997). Reflections on my philosophical journey. In L. E. Hahn, The Philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer, *The Library of Living Philosophers*, Vol. XXIV. Chicago: Open Court.

Kozol, J. (1991). *Savage inequalities*. New York: Crown Publishers.

Stone J. & Mennell, S., ed. (1980). Tocqueville's prophecy. In *On democracy, revolution, and society* (pp. 348-79). Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

White, T. H. (1987). *The once and future king*. New York: Ace Books.