



Imagining Equity

Leveraging the 5 Pedagogical Stances

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“Helping students imagine themselves as important community contributors within (and far beyond) classroom walls is the responsibility of every adult in the system.”

(Winn, in press)

Introduction

Nearly a decade after publishing *Girl Time: Literacy, Justice, and the School-to-Prison Pipeline* (Winn, 2011), my ethnographic study of a woman-focused theater company's playwriting and performance program for incarcerated and formerly incarcerated girls, I continue to think about one girl in particular. Nia. She was powerful yet shy; intelligent yet experiencing great frustration in school, and yearning for freedom and structure at the same time. One morning, after Nia went to school anticipating, like most children, that she would return home that afternoon, she found herself the target of another student's use of a homophobic slur and public accusation that Nia liked his sister. The ensuing fight ended with school security physically restraining Nia and calling the police. By the time Nia's mother learned her daughter was in a youth detention center—a jail for children—it was too late to save Nia from the humiliation of the experience, and together they began an unwanted and unexpected journey through the juvenile justice system.

In the context of a Girl Time summer program for playmaking workshop participants in youth detention centers, I had the pleasure of working with Nia for three summers, as she conquered roles that were outside of her public performance comfort zone both within the community and in the detention center. My reflections of Nia do not include a sad, deficit-centered story of a [nother] Black girl who identifies as LGBTQ. After my own journey as a researcher learning to ask better questions, I asked Nia what she thought she would need to live a healthy, productive life that she desired and deserved. How unremarkable, her desires, in a nation that has the capacity to create the conditions and opportunities she listed things like “being around positive people” and access to meals for her family other than the fast-food she was bringing home from her low wage job, which was all they could afford after two family members found themselves unemployed during the 2008 recession.



Nia was considering the military, which she felt had structure and seemed more stable than wondering whether or when an unforeseen encounter with law enforcement might land you in jail. Nia's other top wish? She wanted to attend a school with enrichment opportunities both during and after school. She wanted to learn from teachers who knew their subject matter (at the time of our interview, Nia was taking math coursework at continuation school with a teacher who specialized in a different discipline and was unable to support students). Nia wanted to graduate and "get a good job."

While I was not a mother at the time of my work with Nia and her peers, I am now. I am deeply struck by a conversation I had after I dropped Nia off at home following a play performance we attended together. Nia's mother insisted I come into the house, a story I have documented (Winn, 2014). She wanted me to see Nia's room and all her efforts to decorate and make the space beautiful. Nia's mother owed me no explanation of her parenting; after all, who was I? Her only point of reference was that I was working with her daughter in a theater program; she likely did not know, for example, that I was a professor at a private institution a short distance from their home. All the same, Nia's mother was acutely aware of the judgments people place on parents who ultimately cannot protect their children from harm and wrongdoings that continue to be sanctioned by the education and juvenile justice systems in this country.

In this paper, I invite readers/stakeholders to imagine equity for children and youth who—like Nia—have faced starkly inequitable opportunities and continue hoping for, as a foundation, classroom and school communities that cultivate purpose and belonging. Where education is about achieving opportunities and freedoms that would change dynamics in ways that would allow and support Nia—and all Nias—to do more than just survive (Love, 2019).



Defining Equity

To communicate about any sense of the pursuit and condition of equity, we must understand how equity is defined and also (re)imagine what it looks, sounds, and feels like. PolicyLink Founder Angela Glover Blackwell¹ (2020) defines equity as “just and fair inclusion into a society in which all can participate, prosper, and reach their full potential.” These three “Ps”—participate, prosper, and potential—are salient characteristics of equity work. Blackwell’s definition is as important as her assertion that discussions of equity need to be embedded in all discourses around the pursuit of equality. While the United States has typically focused on equality, Blackwell argues that “equality eludes specificity,” whereas equity “causes more probing.”

It is this space of probing that provides the purpose of this working paper. Here, I argue for the positioning of five pedagogical stances (5PS) as groundwork for pursuits of justice that transform contexts and communities of education toward increasingly equitable dynamics. The 5PS framework (Winn, In Press, 2019, 2018a, 2018b; Winn & Winn, 2021)—History Matters, Race Matters, Justice Matters, Language Matters, and Futures Matter—offers steps toward equity, using transformative justice mindsets and practices to address how teaching should be approached in an era of hyper-incarceration; the ongoing criminalization of multiply-marginalized children, youth, and their families; and COVID-19 pandemic recovery and racial reckoning on a global scale.

Equity and Equality

Distinguishing between equity and equality is always an important place to begin. While the trilogy of murders in 2020—George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, and Breonna Taylor—spurred a national and international dialogue about and race, equity, and opportunity, many educational institutions are only recently starting to grapple with both concepts and what they mean in the context of learning. Carter and Reardon (2014) assert that four domains of inequality are worthy of examination: (1) Socioeconomic (financial and human capital); (2) Health (physical and psychological); (3) Political (access to political power and political representation); and (4) Sociocultural (identity and cultural freedom and human rights). Inequality research, according to Carter and Reardon, has been lacking, and the reasons include a dearth of work focused on opportunities due to heavy emphasis on “documenting the patterns, trends, and causes,” rather than “identifying effective strategies for reducing it” (p. 2). Equity-oriented education research and practice, then, seek to move beyond documentation and toward action steps.

Under the Obama administration, the U.S. Department of Education positioned itself as “committed to advancing equity in education.” Asserting the need for equity of opportunity, Department of Education initiatives focused on free and high-quality preschool experiences for all children, well-resourced schools that set high expectations for children, and affordable college degrees of high quality. Education equity referred to specific and measurable outcomes and programs such as My Brother’s Keeper; Promise Zones (resources focused on specific zip codes and neighborhoods); and examining the root causes of the racial disparities that characterize school discipline policies, practices, and outcomes.

¹ PolicyLink is an institute “advancing racial and economic equity.” See <https://www.policylink.org>.

When Angela Glover Blackwell worked with the Rockefeller Foundation, the language of “equity” was largely found in conversations related to international outcomes, whereas the term “equality” was typically used in conversations related to solving national problems. For example, the October 2013 *Race to Equity* report on Dane County, which includes Madison, Wisconsin, was a response to the Annie E. Casey Foundation Kids Count Data Book which showed Wisconsin to be one of the worst states in which to raise African American children². The Race to Equity (R2E) team focused on data that captured racial disparities between Black and White families across the domains of education, criminal justice, health care, and the workforce. Understanding that naming the problem and starting critical conversations was not enough, the R2E team created “The Roadmap to Equity: A Two-Generation Approach,” mapping three “overarching/interrelated goals” for achieving equity. R2E asserted that Dane County should focus specifically on low-income communities of color and how to (1) “increase the employment, income and wealth” in these communities; (2) “expand and support” efforts to achieve success in the workplace and parenting simultaneously; and (3) create opportunities for children in these communities “to meet early childhood development milestones” (Wisconsin Council on Children and Families, 2016, pp. 2–3). This specificity allowed for more expansive ways to imagine equity because you can work with “open words” such as design, create, build, re-imagine as you disrupt, defend, and resist (Ginwright, 2017). In the next session, the 5PS—which I have argued are essential to paradigm-shifting toward justice and equity informed by restorative justice—that is, the art and science of making things right and establishing a culture of purpose and belonging for all stakeholders in a community of practice.

² See Annie E. Casey Foundation (2016). Kids Count Data Book: State trends in child wellbeing. <https://www.aecf.org/m/resourcedoc/aecf-the2016kidscountdatabook-2016.pdf>. There is also a 2020 Data Book: <https://www.aecf.org/resources/2020-kids-count-data-book/>.

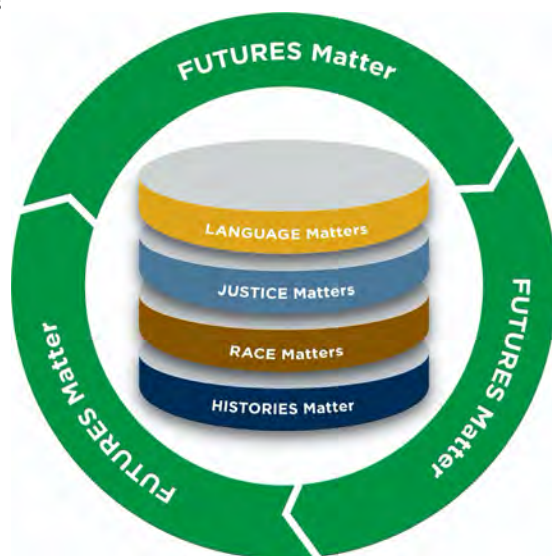


Why 5PS?

Even when stakeholders agree that restorative and/or transformative justice may be worthy of consideration, there is much work to be done to understand and initiate individual and collective next steps. Designed for education stakeholders, the 5PS are steps toward equity and justice that belong in education-focused conversations about pathways to tangible outcomes. I conceptualized the 5PS when I began to fully understand my role as a restorative justice paradigm shift communicator. That is, I am a researcher who is also trained in restorative justice processes, and I have opportunities to curate conversations and exchanges between and among restorative justice practitioners and educators. Much of my recent work has focused on how teaching and learning communities can leverage restorative justice theory and practice to cultivate purpose and belonging for their stakeholders and the five stances—*History Matters*, *Race Matters*, *Justice Matters*, *Language Matters*, and *Futures Matter*—are informed by two decades of research with children, youth, and educators in school and out-of-school settings (see Figure 1).

Educators often want to know how to engage in equity work. Acknowledging history/ies is the foundation. As an attorney who represents working class and working poor African American men unfairly sentenced to the death penalty, Founder and Executive Director of the Equal Justice Initiative Bryan Stevenson quickly understood that racial discrimination and associated opportunity gaps are ever-evolving manifestations of America’s devastating history of racial terror. *Race Matters*, the second stance, acknowledges histories of racial terror and exclusion with particular focus on the impacts and implications of the enslavement of Africans throughout the world, recognizing that chattel slavery was an institution that could never have worked without narratives of racial inferiority and dehumanizing campaigns against people of African descent.³

Figure 1: The 5 Pedagogical Stances



³ To learn more, I highly recommend Angela Y. Davis’ (1981) *Women, race & class* (Random House); Khalil Gibran Muhammad’s (2010) *The condemnation of Blackness: Race, crime and the making of modern urban America* (Harvard University Press); and Ibram X. Kendi’s (2016) *Stamped from the beginning: The definitive history of racist ideas in America* (Bold Type Books).

This is where the third stance, *Justice Matters*, is critical. Justice-seeking movements pursuing both equality and equity—past and current—offer some insight into people’s specific needs. One can reference the Black Panther Party’s 10 Point Plan and the ACLU’s guides to students’—differently-abled, immigrant, LGBTQ, and many others—rights.⁴ To conceptualize the *Justice Matters* stance, I look to what Lorena Márquez (2020) refers to as movement “foot soldiers,” the everyday working people who sought equality and rights for their communities. For example, Márquez asserts that the Chicano/a Movement in California’s capital city, Sacramento, was largely led by workers and parents seeking educational opportunities for their children in public schools. I center these efforts to help people see themselves as agentive and key participants in justice-seeking endeavors, rather than think that movements must be led by one charismatic key figure. The Black Lives Matter Movement is an example of collective struggle with decentralized leadership, a model that allows individual cities a say in what is needed in their specific context.

Language Matters, the fourth stance, is informed by my work as a language, literacy, and culture scholar concerned with the sociocultural context of literacy and the relationship between language and power. My opening discussion of equity and how the term evolved in the context of U.S. freedom struggles is one example of the power of language and why our approach to these conversations is as important in the conversations themselves. Restorative justice circle processes are a way for stakeholders to democratize a conversation and demonstrate how and why listening is equally as important as speaking. Circle processes also provide opportunities for a community to engage in what Angela Y. Davis refers to as critical vocabularies: more nuanced ways to talk about race, gender, and identity.

Futures Matter Stance, the fifth and final stance, was not initially part of my pedagogical stance mapping. However, I soon realized this was a mistake. For more children and youth to have access to just and expansive futures, there must be an investment in equity now. One must have access to education, purpose, and a network that allows and support planning, foresight, and action (Johansen, 2007). Futures Matter is informed by Futures Studies and methodologies and Afrofuturism which I will discuss later.

⁴ <https://www.aclu.org/know-your-rights/students-rights/#the-rights-of-students-with-disabilities>.

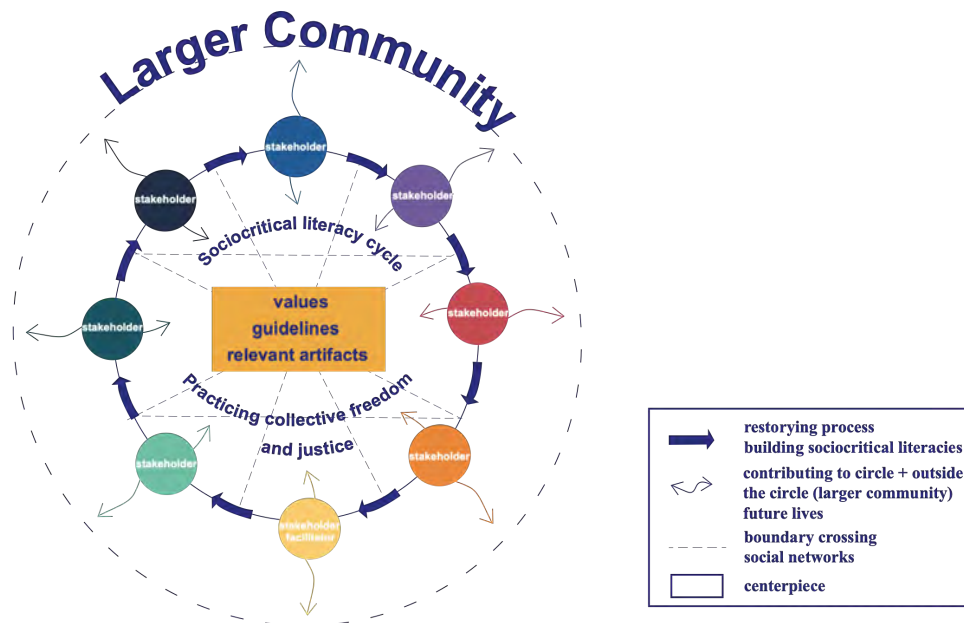


Guiding Questions

to Leverage the 5PS Within Teaching & Learning Communities

Here, I offer additional context and guiding questions based on the 5PS likely to be useful to teaching and learning communities engaged in equity work. Some questions are for individual stakeholders to consider; others are for small groups or the whole community. Because the 5PS are grounded in restorative and transformative justice work—work that is equity-oriented and justice-seeking and might involve the radical overhaul of systems and cycles that do not serve every member of a community—these questions will ideally be introduced through and as part of a restorative justice circle process (see Figure 2). Elsewhere, I argue that restorative justice circle processes can serve as boundary-crossing social networks where stakeholders can historicize their lives and learn how their lived experiences connect to the lives of others (Winn, 2019) and circle processes are well documented in education for building community (McCammon, 2020; Boyes-Watson & Pranis, 2015; Thorsborne & Blood, 2013); repairing harm in schools (Riestenberg, 2012); and, most recently, leveraged to teach across the disciplines (Winn & Winn, 2021). However, the 5PS is unique in that it provides a guide for this work that can be tailored for specific communities of practice.

Figure 2: Circle Processes



History/ies Matter

“Histories never leave us for another inaccessible place. They are part of us; they inhabit us and we inhabit them even when we are not aware of this relationship to history.”

(Angela Y. Davis, 2012)

While history/ies hold some of our blueprints and future mappings of the quest for equity, we overwhelmingly tend to situate equity as a future goal rather than (and without) reaching back to examine the contours and historical underpinnings of relevant scenarios and tensions. Of social movements that continue to hold lessons for us all. One such movement is the Black Power/Liberation Movement, so often overlooked and presented as second to—rather than situated in—the Civil Rights Movement (see, for example, Peniel Joseph). When I work with learning communities, I often use the case study of Ocean Hill–Brownsville and the struggle for community control of the schools in New York City’s borough of Brooklyn. Black and Puerto Rican parents in the late 1960s were increasingly weary that local schools did not view their children and communities as capable and deserving of high-quality education that considered their culture to be an asset to youth. This case, which led to the New York City teacher strike that is often referred to as “the strike that changed New York,” is an example of how when parents worked together, labored together, they could create a strong network (Podair, 2004). Ocean Hill–Brownsville also demonstrated the harms of stark racial divides, as well as harmful assumptions that working class and working poor Black and Latinx people were not involved in their children’s education. When engaging a *History Matters* pedagogical stance, there are key questions to invite individual stakeholders to answer as well as a set of questions to be explored by the larger community using small working groups.

Individual Questions (ideally introduced by a circle keeper/facilitator):

- ❑ What are the histories that shape you?
- ❑ What are the histories that inform your working relationships/interactions with others (think about stories about your name, family stories that get retold, migration/immigration experiences, etc.)?
- ❑ What are historical moments that resonate with you (no need for complete details)?

Community Questions (ideally introduced by a circle keeper/facilitator for stakeholders to explore within small groups):

- ❑ What is your organization’s/institution’s/community’s origin story?
- ❑ Who were your stakeholders when you were established?
- ❑ How have the stakeholders changed?
- ❑ How have these changes impacted your organization/institution/community?
- ❑ What did your organization/institution/community do to prepare for this change?
- ❑ What work still needs to be done? What happened in the past that influences the culture now?

Race Matters

“We are all carrying this illness, this disruption that has created a narrative of racial indifference, and because of that we continue to suffer ... slavery has not ended; it’s evolved.”

(Bryan Stevenson, Stanford University, January 15, 2016)

Racism and racist ideas actively disrupt futures, fooling the perpetrators, as well, into beliefs about racial superiority and related birthrights to resources and comparative power. Among the many harms of racist ideas is the common mindset that “others” have been given breaks or standards have been lowered if/when they appear to have moved from margin to center. A *Race Matters* pedagogical stance requires us to examine how racist ideas are implicit and/or embodied, causing harm that can include exclusion, marginalization, and/or oppressive self-doubt that makes it nearly impossible for oppressed individuals and groups to explore multiple versions of themselves. The individual stakeholder questions as well as the community questions are structured to build momentum and allow for a collective effort to build critical vocabularies about race, racism, and racist ideas.

Individual Questions (ideally introduced by a circle keeper/facilitator):

- ❑ Think of a time you realized race matters. This can be a witnessing or personal experience. What do you understand now that you did not understand then? What tools would have been useful to you?
- ❑ Think of a time when you experienced harm because of race, racism, and/or racist ideas. What did you need before the harm was caused? What did you need after you experienced the harm? What do you need now?
- ❑ Think of a time when you caused harm because of race, racism, and/or racist ideas. What did you need before you caused harm? What did you need after you caused harm? What do you need now?

Community Questions (ideally introduced by a circle keeper/facilitator for stakeholders to explore within small groups):

- ❑ What practices in your organization/institution/community actively engage matters of race?
- ❑ What are your organization’s/institution’s/community’s experiences with race/racism/racist ideas?
- ❑ In what ways—if any—is race coded within/through your organization, or how does race show up?

Justice Matters

“[T]he arc does not bend toward justice ... we have to bend it and that’s the work ahead ... to bend that arc toward more than justice but true emancipation.”

(Robin D. G. Kelley, 2018)

In the 25th anniversary of *Changing Lenses: Restorative Justice for our Times*, Howard Zehr revisits restorative justice as a paradigm shift from punitive responses to harm and wrongdoing to proactive mechanisms that build consensus, purpose, and belonging for all. Justice, especially racial justice, requires active engagement around shared language, shared values, and shared goals. What is critical about Zehr revisiting his groundbreaking text is how he centers racial justice as a goal of restorative justice activity. Civil rights attorney and co-founder of Restorative Justice for Oakland Youth (RJOY), Fania Davis, has argued for a restorative justice process to inform truth and reconciliation work in the United States examining state-sanctioned violence against Black people (2016). The *Justice Matters* stance and the guiding questions provide opportunities to consider how equity and justice can be pursued as a community.

Individual Questions (ideally introduced by a circle keeper/facilitator):

- ❑ How do you define justice? What does it look like? Sound like? Feel like?
- ❑ What are the social movements that have influenced you?
- ❑ What is your first memory of believing passionately in a cause that involved you or members of a community you are part of?
- ❑ What is your first memory of believing passionately in a cause that was focused on members of other communities?

Community Questions (ideally introduced by a circle keeper/facilitator for stakeholders to explore within small groups):

- ❑ How does your organization/institution/community define justice? What does it look like, sound like, and feel like in your organization (or what do you want it to look like, sound like, and feel like)?
- ❑ What role do you want to see your organization/institution/community play in the pursuit of justice?
- ❑ What justice-seeking endeavors is your organization engaged/engaging in?

Language Matters

“My mouth is a motherlode.”

(Gloria Anzaldúa, “How to Tame a Wild Tongue,” 1987)

Equity can and should be embedded in the language we speak. Angela Davis argues for the need to cultivate “critical vocabularies” that aid in the naming of barriers to equity. How do we talk about people, needs, and education problems within and beyond the constraints of labels and hurtful stereotypes? How can we challenge terminology in language that is often accepted as the norm? For example, Martínez (2018) argues for students in the U.S. context who are fluent in languages other than English to be referred to as “emergent bilinguals” as opposed to “English Language Learners.” This assertion positions emergent bilinguals as agentic and in possession of powerful skills worthy of recognition. Inspired and informed by Shalaby’s interviews with young children positioned as “troublemakers” in their schools, a *Language Matters* pedagogical stance requires stakeholders in a school to understand the relationship between language and freedom(s). Shalaby asserts that in educational settings, the freedom of our children—that is, the freedom to dream, think, and imagine beautiful lives for themselves—is disrupted by labels, categories, and monolithic boxes. *Language Matters* is a stance that must be practiced daily with space for growth. Guiding questions for this stance are reflective and invoke storytelling.

Individual Questions (ideally introduced by a circle keeper/facilitator):

- ❑ What are keywords you would use to describe yourself? What are keywords you think others use to describe you? Talk about the points of convergence and divergence.
- ❑ Consider a time someone used the wrong words to describe you. What did you need before this happened? What did you need after this happened?
- ❑ Consider a time when you used the wrong words to describe someone else or when talking to someone else. What did you need before this happened? What did you need after this happened?

Community Questions (ideally introduced by a circle keeper/facilitator for stakeholders to explore within small groups):

- ❑ What keywords would you want people to use when considering your organization/ institution/community?
- ❑ How is your mission/vision animated throughout your organization?
- ❑ What discourses are used in/common to your organization/institution/community?

“Envisioning and making the future must be a massively public endeavor.”

(Marina Gorbis, June 14, 2016)

The *Futures Matter* stance is a call for expansive identities. In his groundbreaking text, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*, Kelley examines the Black liberation movement and how activists in the late 1960s and 1970s were attempting to build institutions and create opportunities that would imagine generations of young people to imagine and experience freedom. One of Kelley’s assertions is that it is often clear what young people are fighting against; however, it is not always clear what they are dreaming about. Future Matter draws from Futures and foresight methodologies as well as Afrofuturism. Foresight methods have largely been used to build corporations by leveraging scenario planning and creating plans that consider 10 years into the future. More recently, futurists have been calling for more access to these practical tools (Gorbis, 2016) not only in business but also in education (Winn, 2021).

Conceptually this stance draws from Afrofuturism as well as Black speculative fiction. Afrofuturism—a cultural aesthetic that brings together elements of science fiction and Black cultures and histories—has provided writers, artists, designers, and intellectuals a pathway for imagining the futures of Black people. Rather than being passive and waiting for characters and stories to appear, a new generation has started writing the stories and creating the prototypes using Black cultural perspectives. Many of the guiding questions are inspired by the work of foresight specialists and futurists such as the Institute For The Future.

Individual Questions (ideally introduced by a circle keeper/facilitator):

- ❑ How do you imagine yourself 10 years from now? Begin with “It is the year [add 10 years to the current year] and I will be ...”
- ❑ What must happen for you to embody your aspirations for 10 years from now?

Community Questions (ideally introduced by a circle keeper/facilitator for stakeholders to explore within small groups):

- ❑ How would you like your organization/institution/community of practice to be known 10 years from now? What steps will you take to get there?
- ❑ What assets does your organization have to get to where you want to be?
- ❑ What are your current gaps and how do you plan to address these?

Where do we go from here?

5PS provides tangible ways for communities of practice to bend the arc toward justice and equity. This work should be guided by a dedicated facilitator or pair of facilitators and there should be a commitment to implement this process over time as opposed to a one-day training or workshop. Stakeholders need time to think together, reflect, engage the work, come back to think together and create action plans. Educational institutions should consider bringing different types of stakeholders into the circle—both literally and figuratively—including parents and families, leadership, staff, and teachers. Varying perspectives are needed to examine the guided questions from many different vantage points. And, finally, this transformative approach to pursuing equity depends on an entire organization making a commitment. Often there are champions of this work in every setting; however, this process generates the capacity for distributed equity work that extends beyond a key person or committee.



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