White Paper
What is Really Educational Equity?
Edwin Lou Javius Founder/CEO/President of EDEquity

Committed to working with districts and schools in the area of Equity, it is evident that there are different perspectives that have rained down on the definition and actions of Educational Equity in our schools. I would like to take the liberty to engage the reader to provide some clarity and actions of the Why, How and What of Educational Equity. The working definition we share and operationalize with district and schools is... *Equity is providing additional and different resources (intellectual, human and fiscal) to ensure all students and teachers receive what is needed to exceed performance targets.*

Educators are prolific in “word-smithing” and in putting the bow on topics and initiatives. This article will provide the reader a better understanding of the ‘Why’, ‘How’ and ‘What’ of Equity, which has been missing in the conversation and action of Equity.

*Communicating your “Why” for Equity*

**Why?** The reason for Equity in schools is more than the need to close the student achievement gap. We have to come to grips with the historical issues of power, privilege and placation that serves as the hidden backdrop. We have to realize the structure of American schools was designed to accelerate those students and families who are able to confirm and validate a middle-class and euro-centric construct. Even for people of color, those who can assimilate and can demonstrate school norms of learning and behavior tend to gain greater access in K-12 schools.

The issue of poverty and the impact that poor people face, is real and deserves significant attention. The scope of this article will pay direct attention to Race and Pedagogy. I believe the “lump in the carpet” is Race more so than poverty as my counter narrative researchers claim. I justify my position through my work within states and districts who, when asked to disaggregate the Socio-Economic data by race, are startled by the revelations that poor White students score at the same level or higher than affluent Black and Brown students. This level of disequilibrium should prompt us to explore rather than discount the impact of Race in student outcomes. If a district/school’s data does not reveal the aforementioned analysis, this district/school may be considered an outlier!

When we as educators discuss Equity, it is imperative that we recognize and be required to state the “Why;” and the Why is much broader than just closing the achievement gap! It has to be the societal/moral imperative. If we are not in the business of equipping our students with 21st century skills and oral language development, our folks who protect and serve will feel that their life is in danger. We know how that plays out for students and adults of color!
The moral imperative of grasping the “Why” is the most important piece of the puzzle to implementing Equity. The compelling “Why” should be the first steps in implementing Equity and should become the internal push when the work gets hard, believe me educating students with holes in their learning is very difficult but not impossible. I recognize that many teachers are given “gifts” from parents (their children) that love learning but may not have skills to intensify their love for learning. School is not about blaming, it is about teaching those who don’t know yet or struggle to understand, education is not about testing but how to become critical thinkers, collaborators, creative and sophisticated communicators!

The “How” needs to be different
As Simon Sinek (2009) indicates, the way great leaders communicate is from inside to out! The circles of communication, place the “Why in the center ring and the “How” is the next outer ring and the ‘What” is the last ring of communication. The “How” is where our educators are ‘ready’ or ‘want’ to listen. When I work with districts, the “strategy” is really what they want from me. I must confess, my response is not as sexy or have as much “wow” factor as the “Why”! I respond to their want by determining how rigorously they plan in their Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) or Teacher Collaboration. I can unequivocally say that rigorous instructional planning is the key to implementing Equity. The leaders of PLCs and other experts have placed a strong emphasis on analyzing data and making informed decisions around data. I concur that data is key.

However, I have witness how data analysis has “high jacked” the collaboration and planning because many teachers and instructional coaches have not moved to the 80/20 rule! 80% on the “How” and 20% on the “What!” In Equity PLCs the 80/20 rule is implemented! So teachers have more time to engage “what they know about their students and how to design rigorous student-centered lessons.” As Javius and Tomlinson (2012) indicates, the content, process and product of differentiated instruction should use students’ learning profiles (culture and linguistic experience) to allow the learner to access state and local standards.

Noteworthy, to the “How” of Equity, there is resounding information about culturally responsive instruction to support ALL students and accelerate the rate for students of color. If we believe the premise of Equity is about providing students and adults what they need to exceed performance targets, accessing how students’ make meaning through their cultural, racial and social construct effective implementation of Culturally Responsive Practices (CPRs) becomes the gateway to accelerating the learning for all (Vygotsky, 1978).
Why do we know CRP works in schools? Quite simply! Most of the artifacts, text selections, and school norms, mirror a particular cultural experience. Data gives evidence that middle class euro-centric ways of doing things in our schools is the way for student success. Which may cause conflicting struggles for students who can’t or don’t choose to engage school that way!

Broadening CRP to include experiences for students of color is a “How” that needs to be explored at all levels of the system. Just providing a book with “black or brown folks” in it is not a CRP! Teaching students how to understand a different perspective and how the experiences of the text may or may not align to your personal experiences is one way to deepen the thought processes of ALL students. Our white students need to know how different cultures may differ from their experiences. This analysis of students’ cultural differences can provide a better understanding of different perspectives; and will provide a catalyst for Americans to have healthy conversations regarding Race. If we continue to “hide” that there are different perspectives within America, our students will leave our school system with a misguided perspective that the ‘dominate culture’ is the only way to access the American Dream!

The “What” should address the entire system
Last but not least, the “What!” The “What” refers to the results of Equity. The effective implementation of Equity will transform the adults in the system. Educators continue to believe the educational outcome, increasing test scores, is the only desirable outcome of Equity. I offer you to engage a different perspective. The desired ‘What’ of Equity is developing a system that is more reflective and takes immediate action of the situational and institutional barriers within the system which greatly impact the adults’/educators’ ability to reach & teach all students.

The system will be impacted at three levels; district, site and classroom. The system will implement processes, protocols and accountability structures to push the top and accelerate the bottom of the different students groups. The district will have a Governing Board that clearly understands that advocating for silent and silenced voices will provoke “privilege parents!” And we have resounding evidence that when “certain middle class parents engage the system at the Board level, they can move the system. As Alfie Kohn, indicates in his article “Only for My Kids,” privileged middle class White parents believe in transformation for “others” but not for their kids! The system must be ready to defend the predictable stance. If it is predictable, then it is preventable. An Equity driven District, predicts the Good, the Bad and the Ugly and plans accordingly.
The site level is where we have “boots on the ground!” School site leadership is the make or break of implementing Equity. An interesting revelation is emerging from school principals that requires immediate attention. When principals say, “Good teaching will improve outcomes for all students. My response to the principals and instructional coaches is, “Good and great teaching are 3rd cousins; not brother and sister!” There stark differences between the Good and Great! Effective differentiated instruction, with students being the producers of knowledge rather than the consumers of knowledge, is moving toward great teaching. Good teaching for all is an equal strategy!

Our site principals must cultivate a school culture where the adults are comfortable being uncomfortable. In order to deeply experience the impact of Equity, leaders must begin cultivating a learning environment where racially disaggregated student data is a norm of the school culture and teachers use the data to have healthy instructional conversations to increase the learning of the top and bottom student groups. We can no longer think that the absence of racial, linguistic and socio-economic data will somehow close the racial achievement gap.

Equity driven site leaders have an insatiable appetite to coaching up mediocre instruction. In implementing Equity, the leader works toward being a masterful instructional leader. If we are committed to effectively implementing Equity, the site leader needs to know the elements of an effective lesson. Yes I’m going back y’all - Madeline Hunter! Effective leaders know what good and great tastes like! More importantly, they know how to “coach up” to achieve greatness!

The 3rd level of implementing is in the classroom. This is where the rubber meets the road. As stated earlier, Culturally Responsive Practices is an approach to engage eager learners. Classroom Equity is 75% mind-set and 25% strategies. The teachers’ expectations are critical to implementing Equity. Teachers must understand that what they believe influences their actions with students. The works of Dweck (2006), involves moving the conversations and actions of teaching adults and students to transform their thinking from a fixed mindset to a growth mindset. For students of color, teachers must understand that the “stereotype threat” is real! Teachers with an Equity mindset, understand that race, culture and language are always to be considered as positive instructional attributes when designing lessons.

Equity-driven classes don’t wait for students to experience destructive struggles, but instead, they anticipate the struggle and plan effectively to minimize the struggle for the students. Teachers are overtly conscious of the fact that students need “peacock moments” to stay engaged in the lesson. More importantly, when students are validated and affirmed for their efforts, they become more rigorously engaged in the learning process. I ask educators to be very cognizant of the details of implementing Equity. The results of our misuse of its importance will sentence certain students to societal ugliness!

That’s my Why! What is yours?
References


