Equity Now

Equity Now

Justice, Repair, and Belonging in Schools

Tyrone C. Howard

CORWIN

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Contents

Publisher's Acknowledgments ix

About the Author xi

INTRODUCTION: WHY EQUITY MATTERS 1

MOVING EQUITY FORWARD FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE 7

1 EQUALITY VERSUS EQUITY: DELINEATING DEFINITIONS 11

AN EQUITY FRAMEWORK 13

EQUITY NOW AND WHY IT MATTERS 20

UNPACKING EQUALITY 22

ALL HANDS ON DECK 24

WHO ARE WE SERVING TODAY? THE DIVERSITY–EQUITY REALITY 26

STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES 27

LANGUAGE LEARNERS 27

STUDENTS LIVING IN POVERTY 28

THE CURRENT POLITICAL MOMENT 31

2 DISTRICTWIDE EQUITY: RESPONDING TO THE COVID-19 EFFECT AND BEYOND 35

POSTPANDEMIC, WHAT CAN DISTRICTS DO TO ATTAIN EDUCATIONAL EQUITY? 40

BOOK-BANNING NATION: A CAUSE FOR CONCERN 55

RESPONDING TO STUDENTS' MENTAL HEALTH AND OTHER NEEDS 56

ANOTHER APPROACH: COMMUNITY SCHOOLS 58

3 SCHOOLWIDE EQUITY: CENTERING OUR MOST VULNERABLE STUDENTS 65

STEPS TOWARD BUILDING AN EQUITY-CENTERED SCHOOL CULTURE 66

ADDRESSING HATE SPEECH: AN IMPORTANT PART OF POSITIVE SCHOOL CULTURE 69

SUPPORTING OUR MOST VULNERABLE STUDENTS 74

SUPPORTING STUDENTS IN FOSTER CARE 77

EXAMINING ADVERSITY IN CHILDHOOD 78

HOW CAN SCHOOLS RESPOND? 83

SUPPORTING YOUTH EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS 84

MENTAL HEALTH MATTERS 88

4 LEADERSHIP AND EQUITY: THE FOUNDATION OF EQUITY-CENTERED SCHOOLS 95

CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE SCHOOL LEADERSHIP 103

WHY EMPATHY AND LISTENING MATTER FOR LEADERS 110

5 EQUITY IN THE CLASSROOM 117

MOVING BEYOND SELF-CARE 119

RELEVANCE MATTERS: CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE TEACHING IN THE CLASSROOM 121

LITERACY ACROSS THE CURRICULUM MATTERS 137

TEACHER REFLECTION AND EQUITY 138

6 PARENT/CAREGIVER ENGAGEMENT AND EQUITY 143

THE BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATION 145

WHEN PARENTS/CAREGIVERS ARE TOO INVOLVED 151

PARENTS/CAREGIVERS AND SCHOOL BOARD PROTESTS: A MOVEMENT OR A MOMENT? 153

RELATIONAL TRUST 156

LEADERS MATTER TOO 158

7 DATA AND EQUITY 165

FORMS OF DATA 166
WHAT DATA SHOULD WE BE COLLECTING? 169
INFORMAL ASSESSMENTS AS DATA EQUITY 172
STUDENT VOICES AS DATA 175
EXAMINING DATA THROUGH A DISPROPORTIONALITY LENS 177
DISAGGREGATED DATA 178
DATA TO INFORM INSTRUCTION 181

References 187

Index 199

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Dedicated to my grandchildren
Jaye Simari, my joy, and Harlem Rashaad, my angel.

Introduction

Why Equity Matters

May 2024 will mark the 70th anniversary of the historic *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling. At the time, the *Brown* decision was hailed as a landmark judicial decision that would address one of the most stubborn and complex realities of U.S. life: unequal education. Core to the idea of equal education for all students was a dismantling of racial inequities that have plagued non-white students for centuries in the United States. *Brown*, at the time, in all its hubris sought to end racial inequality in U.S. schools and, in the eyes of many, was thought to be a potential catalyst for how racial equality in other aspects of U.S. society could be achieved. The idea was that if the nation could do better by its young people and schools, the rest of the country would soon follow suit. In almost three-quarters of a century since the *Brown* decision was rendered, the dreams, hopes, and wishes of a country built on freedom, justice, and equal opportunity have been deferred for many and outright denied for others. In the words of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., in his famous March on Washington speech of 1963:

> In a sense we've come to our nation's capital to cash a check. . . . It is obvious today that America has defaulted on this promissory note insofar as her citizens of color are concerned. Instead of honoring this sacred obligation, America has given the Negro people a bad check, a check which has come back marked "insufficient funds."

How can schools, and the United States, honor the request of Dr. King to hold our nation, and its schools, to the promise of fairness, justice, and the pursuit of happiness? In many ways,

schools have served as an experimental site for the wider United States when it comes to racial justice, hope, and opportunity. How can U.S. schools deliver on the promissory note that Dr. King talked about when it comes to a basic and fundamental right such as education? Many in this country are hopeful for a first-rate education for their children, yet it remains elusive for too many—desperately desired, but for so many unattainable. Families move across district, city, and state lines; immigrant families make tremendous sacrifices across borders and oceans; working families work multiple jobs; and parents and caregivers spend massive amounts of their income, all with the hope of getting their children a good education. So, questions remain. Can we achieve racial equity in schools? Can education be the proverbial equalizer for social mobility, racial harmony, and societal cohesion? The idea is that if schools can serve as harbingers of justice and spaces of integration, opportunity, and access, other aspects of the nation will follow in creating the type of democratic society that abides by its lofty ideals and principles. Educational researcher Rosalyn Mickelson wrote a compelling research article in 1990 called "The Attitude-Achievement Paradox Among Black Adolescents." What she found is that despite ongoing obstacles to equal education, poor performance, and less-than-ideal supports in schools, education was still highly valued by Black youth, Black families, and Black communities. She reported that Black youth have positive attitudes about education and believe in the power of education as a vehicle for social mobility. Yet, seven decades after the *Brown* ruling, many of the stubborn educational inequities that fall along racial and socioeconomic lines have not diminished. Why do those whom the nation has gone to great lengths to deny education still believe in the power that it has?

In a moment when our nation is becoming increasingly diverse along racial and ethnic lines, the reality is that those on the margins of society still hold a firm desire and belief that with a good education there is no limit to how far one can go. I am often reminded of the comments my father, who grew up in the segregated South in the '40s and '50s, would make to my brother and me when it came to education. He frequently said, "Take your education seriously. Get as much of it as you can, because once you get it, no one can ever take it from you." Those words have resonated with me for a lifetime, and it is a sentiment that countless other adults heard growing up and a message that many young people continue to hear from parents, caregivers, and other family members today. In short, the message was then, and is today, loud and clear: education matters. At a time when new economies and emerging technologies continue to

emerge and creative, diverse, cross-collaborative citizens are in an increasingly interdependent world essential, education still matters, but opportunities to learn have remained stubbornly intact for many students. Notable progress cannot be denied for the education of BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, people of color) students in the nation's schools over the past several generations. However, what remains painfully clear with almost any examination of P-20 systems is that educational justice and equality in education remain elusive. Derek Bell (2004), a noted legal scholar, says of *Brown* that the justices tried to solve a social problem with a legal remedy. In essence, Bell wondered, can you legislate hearts and minds when it comes to educational opportunity? In many ways, race, gender, socioeconomic status, language, and ability all remain considerable points of contention when it comes to who receives educational access and opportunity in the United States. Why does race continue to plague educational opportunity? Why do anti-Black racism, anti-Asian hate, and xenophobia remain a reality in far too many schools across the country? Why has a student's zip code continued to be a reliable predictor of school opportunity and success? Why has *Brown* not reached its lofty goals? What does our science tell us about educational opportunity? Why do so many aspects of educational research, policy, and practice omit examinations of race and racism? How have we addressed gender inequities in schools? As educational leaders, thinkers, practitioners, scholars, researchers, and policymakers, it is essential for our community to start and sustain a national and international dialogue about opportunity and education for all students comprehensively and collaboratively. It is vital to create an intersectional lens to how and why we do the work that we do. Why has our quest for equality been so elusive? Are we okay with certain students not getting the type of education that all students deserve? The purpose of this book is to focus squarely on a term that has been used excessively in education over the past two decades—*equity*. We need equity now. Not next week, not next month, not next year, but in a much more urgent fashion, as in now. We need a hard reset on educational equity and racial justice in schools. Many thought that the reopening of schools postpandemic would provide us an opportunity to reimagine schools and to think bold and creatively about education. Unfortunately, we have largely gone back to business as usual. Our children need and deserve more equitable practices and more equitable schools. But more importantly, what does equity look like in action? I have had the honor of working with hundreds of schools and thousands of teachers and leaders over the past two decades, and what I have consistently heard is that there is a clearer sense of what the term *equity* means, but less clarity about what it looks like in action. This book seeks to

address the gap between how we understand equity conceptually and what equity looks like in practice. Equity in action rests on the idea that large segments of today's student population are not receiving the type of education that they deserve; moreover, the overwhelming number of students who come from racially diverse and low-income backgrounds are among those most in need of better educational opportunities. Students who are among our most vulnerable need something different in today's schools.

The 2020s will be seen through a historical lens as one of the most monumental decades when it comes to society's challenges. The quest for racial reckoning, an unstable economy, and intense climate change are all major realities in this decade. Also looming large over the entire decade will be COVID-19 and its impact on everyone. In many ways, the COVID-19 pandemic and its residual effects could likely result in one of the biggest detractors to educational equity since racially segregated schools. Disparate outcomes in educational experiences became even wider in the face of school closures, disproportionate death, and grief in particular communities, and ongoing debates about masks, vaccinations, and virtual learning will reverberate for years to come. Increasing data points continue to emerge, highlighting how much all students regressed academically during the pandemic but that those who were already on the fringes suffered even further erosion in academic gains. The mantra of education as the proverbial equalizer has come into serious question over the past three years. In many ways, COVID-19 exposed deep-seated inequities that have plagued the nation for decades, and at a time when the nation's schools are more racially and culturally diverse than ever before, the consequences have national ramifications for the largest segments of the student population (low-income, English learners, students of color), and this is why we need equity now. Furthermore, having students of color, a disproportionate number of whom happen to be low-income, has major implications for the future of the nation. The issues faced in education today are not Black problems, white problems, Latinx problems, or poor people's problems. They are American problems and will require a national effort to get this done right—to close opportunity gaps, increase equity in schools, and ensure that every student has access to a high-quality education. With issues such as climate change, polarizing politics, a volatile yet new economy, inflation, and increased homelessness and hopelessness all becoming relevant in this moment, we need something different. We need a hard reset to seriously contemplate how we create the schools that our students need and deserve. We need a deep reflective state as a nation to better understand, in a moment of increasing

diversity, that the students who are most diverse often face the most social and academic challenges. We must recognize the toxicity that the nation and its schools face from centuries of racism, classism, sexism, and ableism (Benjamin, 2022).

This book makes a call for us not to prioritize equity as our goal but for equity to be our pathway to achieve equality, with all its aims and aspirational focus. However, to achieve educational equity requires a bold, courageous, and unapologetic commitment to advocating for our most vulnerable students. I make the contention that, if you are serious about doing the work of equity, you recognize that this is not for the faint of heart, it is not for the thin-skinned, and it is not for those easily shaken by criticism. If you are doing the work of transformative equity, you must be prepared to be ostracized, denounced, demoted, excluded, and seen as someone who is a problem. Doing the work for those on the margins is not easy. Though it should be lauded, it is the hardest work to do, because the rugged individualism mantra we have been socialized with teaches us to think that people's failures or shortcomings are a result of their own lack of effort, hard work, and decision making. This book operates from the standpoint that systems and structures, not only individual efforts, are the primary explanations for today's widening disparities. Yes, local acts can go a long way in dismantling systems and structures of disadvantage. Thus, it is important to be bold, courageous, and brave when doing equity work. I have often suggested that in doing equity work it is vital for us to make a fundamental shift in our approach to doing this work. It is important for us to move from safe spaces to brave spaces. A *safe space* is ideally one that does not incite judgment based on identity or experience, where the expression of both can exist and be affirmed without fear of repercussion and without the pressure to educate. While learning may occur in these spaces, the ultimate goal is to provide support. Safe spaces are vital because they require respect, cordiality, and decency. The challenge is that we have often remained in the safe space too long. Many people are conflict averse and do not want to have hard conversations about why students fail in schools every year. Our willingness to stay safe and play nice is making us complicit in student failure. If we want equity now, we need to make a move to a bolder, more necessary space, or what I refer to as a brave space. A *brave space* encourages honest, sustained, and critical dialogue. Such dialogue requires recognizing our differences and holding ourselves, and each person, accountable to do the work of sharing experiences and coming to new understandings about our current realities in schools—a feat that's often hard and typically uncomfortable. Brave spaces are hard because they require vulnerability, self-reflection, and

ultimately action. Brave spaces also require us to have hard discussions with people who we work with, and may even like, but who we see inflicting harm on students. Figure I.1 lists the elements of both safe and brave spaces. One of the key elements of equity in action is that school leaders, board members, superintendents, classroom teachers, and other school personnel must be prepared to have challenging dialogues about the attitudes, values, and beliefs that serve as barriers to creating educational equity. The discussions that are needed must be centered on root causes of why disparities persist and, most importantly, what role we all can play in creating welcoming, affirming, responsive, and rigorous classrooms and schools. This book seeks to be solutions oriented about what can be done to make equity a reality.

FIGURE I.1 ● The Elements of Safe and Brave Spaces

SAFE SPACES	BRAVE SPACES
Cordial, respectful, congenial	Respectful, but challenging at times
Avoid confrontation	Encourage respectful differences of opinions
Evade difficult conversations	Lean into difficult conversations
Comfort is priority	Discomfort creates opportunity for growth and transformation
Goal is support	Goal is to create equitable spaces

This book asks readers to lean into brave spaces to create the schools that so many of our students desperately need. We need equity now. Creating brave spaces in schools means that we cannot avoid topics about institutional and individual acts of racism that occur in schools and create irreparable harm for many students of color. It also means that we cannot avoid uneasy discussions about gender inequities, homophobia, and transphobia that are often rampant in certain schools and classrooms. The same thing can be said about deficit-based beliefs and behaviors that are directed toward students who are growing up in poverty that only center on what those students cannot do, and what they do not have, and fail to see their promise and potential. Schools cannot improve and become equity centered until brave spaces become a normal part of school culture. Adults have to become comfortable being uncomfortable in certain spaces if we are to attain equity-centered schools. Frequently, adult comfort supersedes students' well-being.

If we cannot be uncomfortable when discussing ways that we may be reinjuring students, then we have larger challenges. I often ask, "What is our fear in being uncomfortable?" Why can't we experience what is so common for countless students in our schools? The reality is that many students are uncomfortable in our schools every day and have been so for years. They are uncomfortable because of their race, gender identity, language, ability, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, and other identities that we have not affirmed, or because we have not created schools that will support them for their unique identities. Hence, adult discomfort to create greater student comfort and inclusion is the least that we can do if we are focused on getting this work done. In many schools today, adult comfort supersedes students' well-being, which is unacceptable. We can and must do better. All of us. Every educator has room for growth and the ability to better support students. The work is difficult and challenging at times, but the outcomes can be immensely rewarding, and the potential transformation and results are well worth the sacrifice.

MOVING EQUITY FORWARD FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE

This book makes the call that equity-based approaches need to be embedded in all of our efforts as educators at all levels. We need equity now. Our students deserve it, and I believe that we can create and sustain equity-centered schools. The book seeks to lay out ideas, practices, policies, and strategies that can help us to obtain that goal. In Chapter 1, I lay out a call of what equity is, and why it matters. I offer definitional delineations between equity and equality and make a case that equity is in line with core democratic values, such as righteousness, fairness, and inclusion, which we purport to live by in a free and fair society. I also discuss the equity framework that will guide this book and be referenced throughout, the importance of justice, acknowledging and repairing past harms, and inclusivity. In Chapter 2, I make a case for what districtwide equity can look like. When considering equity at what I call the 30,000-foot aerial view, it is essential to examine structural factors such as per-pupil funding, hiring practices, promotional opportunities, policies and procedures, and leadership structures that set the tone for the entire district. In Chapter 2, I also lay out core questions and considerations that superintendents, board members, and district leaders should be continuously asking. I frequently am asked to come and talk to various school districts about equity-related concerns. I typically hear from teachers and staff: "This is a training that our leaders at the district need,"

or “Why aren’t our board members and the superintendent’s team here for this?” In short, school districts cannot maximize their impact on students unless all hands are on deck, and it starts with those at the top, namely district leadership, which must embody equity if it is to be enacted at the school level. Chapter 3 will detail what schoolwide equity can look like now. Similar to the work of districts, there are efforts that school-level leaders can take when it comes to creating equitable outcomes. School personnel with an equity-based focus need to think about how they inspire each other, how they can create conditions for equitable practices to flourish, and how they can engage in real courageous conversations with colleagues about diversity, equity, and inclusion. Moreover, equity-based leaders need to also think about how they can work with their staffs to become more culturally responsive with their practices, and how to build an equity-centered culture at the school and be intentional about engaging families and caregivers in an equitable fashion. Chapter 4 will lay out approaches that specifically address what role school leaders can play in achieving equity. Leaders provide an important foundation for teachers and students to be successful. Building leaders are vital in setting a tone, building a culture, and creating the type of environments for everyone to thrive. To that end, how can leaders be instructional leaders, building managers, and innovative leaders with equity at the center of all their efforts? In Chapter 4, I lay out important characteristics of equity-based leadership that can prove valuable for all school- and building-level leaders. In Chapter 5, I talk about equity at the classroom level. Even if the school- and district-level efforts fall short in creating an ecosystem that allows equity to thrive, teachers can still be instrumental in creating equitable learning opportunities in their classroom. While acknowledging the challenges that come when schools are not right, teachers still have significant power when it comes to relationships, expectations, curriculum, instruction, assessment, and classroom climate that can help or harm students. In Chapter 5, I also identify essential practices, strategies, and resources that teachers can think about and implement. Chapter 6 speaks to one of the more important yet overlooked aspects of equity, which is family and parent/caregiver engagement in schools. Parents/caregivers are essential partners in the educational enterprise for students, and as a result, schools need to rethink how to engage parents and caregivers. Among the issues addressed in this chapter is being mindful of who our parents and caregivers are. What do parents/caregivers want most from schools and teachers? How can schools move beyond superficial aspects of parent/caregiver involvement to a more robust engagement with them that sees them as knowledgeable, resourceful, and equal

partners in the education of young people? Finally, in Chapter 7, I discuss equity-based ways to examine, analyze, and understand data with an equity lens. Given the fact that districts are being provided access to more data than ever before, what are rubrics or templates that leaders and teachers can use to make the most sense of the data to inform their practices, policies, and procedures? Data-informed decision making continues to be a hot topic for educators at all levels. But whose data and what data counts? However, without an equity lens to make meaning of data, such efforts can only reify current practices that disrupt equity efforts.

There will be three key important theoretical anchors that guide the work of equity now. I will address them more in detail in Chapter 1, but those anchors are (1) justice, (2) recognizing and repairing harm, and (3) belonging. Each chapter will identify ways to address these three anchor points in education policy and practice. Each chapter will conclude with seven questions that can be used for deeper learning in small learning communities. The purpose of the seven questions is to help practitioners, leaders, and parents/caregivers reflect on policies and practices that are most relevant to them as they engage in equity work. The purpose of these questions is also to lead small learning communities, teacher and leader professional development, or just individual introspection. Please use the questions as a guide and a gauge of where you and your school or district are with the work of equity. Finally, each chapter will conclude with seven additional resources and readings that can be used for deepening the knowledge on key concepts for that chapter. The primary audience for this book is school leaders and practitioners. However, the book also has relevance for school board members, district superintendents, school counselors, paraprofessionals, and other school personnel who are focused on achieving educational equity. It is also my intent to not make this book highly prescriptive. I often cringe when asked by people to tell me five things to do to be more equity-minded. I lay out suggestions, strategies, and resources in this book. But I try to stay away from step-by-step "how to" approaches. I do not think equity is achieved that way; every district, every school, and every classroom has its own culture, makeup, and complexities. It is my hope that readers can use this book and apply the information to their unique ecosystem. This book is designed to encourage participation, disagreement, reflection, inquiry, and discussion of educators on important topics that play out in schools every day yet are not often discussed in small learning communities, in staff meetings, or at the district level. It is my hope that this book serves as a guide for resources, supports, knowledge, and strategies that will help educators with their equity walk. It is

essential to remember that not everyone is at the same place along their equity journey. Our goal is not to push those away who are not where we think they should be or where we are in the journey. To the contrary, our schools are better when we call everyone in to be leaders in their equity journey.

CHAPTER 1

Equality Versus Equity

Delineating Definitions

For years, there have been discussions around how to create the types of schools that all students need and deserve. For years, we have heard the mantra of educational equality. This idea emanates from the perspective that as a society that promotes democratic ideals of fairness, justice, and equality, it only makes sense that our schools would serve as spaces that embody these same principles, and that we would socialize students to value and uphold these principles. However, what is clear is that from the beginning of the United States as a nation-state, there has always been a distinction between who has access to schooling and who does not. The work of Joel Spring (2016) is important here, because he documents how, since the 17th century, the idea of formal schooling was only afforded to the sons of wealthy, white landowners. Hence, girls, poor whites, Indigenous peoples, and subsequently enslaved Africans were not deemed worthy of having access to education. Accordingly, when we talk about equity as opposed to equality, we must understand that at the outset of formal education in the United States not everyone was provided the same opportunity, and there has been an incessant game of catch-up ever since. Thus, for decades, schools served as spaces that provided education in literacy, numeracy, science, leadership, love of country, government, and other approaches to being learned to only a select few, while others were excluded from such spaces. From the outset, inequities were essentially baked into our nation's educational DNA. An example that I frequently use is a 100-yard race. If one

participant can start at the 50-yard mark while others are at the starting line, we cannot ignore the significant head-start advantage that one of the runners has over the others. The runners at the starting line can run with the same amount of effort, stride, and form, but it will not matter; they will still lose the race. The significant head start given to the head-start runner means that this runner will win every time. And we will continue to tell those who do not win that they have to work harder, improve their form, train harder, and run with more grit and focus if they want to win. In many ways, that is the way that we must think about educational equality in the United States. For centuries, girls, Indigenous peoples, enslaved Africans, and other colonized populations were denied access to education. During this time, the sons of wealthy, white landowners were able to develop the reading, writing, numeracy, and thinking skills that afforded them to acquire, build, and transfer wealth and educational opportunity that would serve as the foundational building blocks of the United States. Hence, when looking at any type of academic data today, it should come as no surprise that Black, Indigenous, Latinx, and Asian Pacific Islander students are consistently behind their white counterparts. The same groups have been behind for centuries in a never-ending game of catch-up. As we have made efforts to close achievement and opportunity gaps, there have been narratives that center on the need for students to work harder, be more focused, and make better choices and for families to adopt better values. Yet, missing from many of these narratives is a focus on larger structural and historical inequities, which shows how educational disparities have existed since America's first days and have endured ever since. Angela Duckworth (2016) has talked about the need for students to develop more grit (perseverance and persistence) to be successful. I personally take major exception to such asks because they essentially place pressure on students to try harder in a system that sets up many of them to lose from the outset. I think we need to demonstrate grit to fix the systems that do not serve all children well. I think we need to demonstrate grit to dismantle inequality in our communities and schools. I think we need to demonstrate grit to eliminate racism, misogyny, exploitation, transphobia, and homophobia in our society. Our essential, fundamental questions must be these: When will we stop blaming students and families and start blaming systems and structures that do not serve them well? How can we provide more supports, resources, time, attention, and advocacy for those groups that have been historically disadvantaged to create more equal schooling opportunities?

AN EQUITY FRAMEWORK

There have been an endless number of books, articles, and reports on educational equity. Yet, we still seem to not be able to get it right and create the types of schools that all students deserve. So what makes this book different? Well, this book seeks to place an emphasis on some of the historical issues that have led us here but, more importantly, seeks to identify resources, strategies, *and practices* that can have an impact on students in schools in the here and now. Moreover, this book seeks to talk to all stakeholders involved in the education of students. Simply stated, if our work is not having a meaningful impact on our students, we must ask why we continue to engage in such efforts. Attaining educational equity to have meaningful impact for all students is one of the primary goals of this book. The framework for equity in this book is centered on three core principles (see Figure 1.1): *justice*, *recognizing and repairing past harms*, and *belonging*. Each of the principles has core relevance to how I think about creating equity-based schools, and should be thought about by all school personnel involved in the work of educating today's student population. The principles in my equity framework need to be understood, analyzed, studied, critiqued, and implemented by all stakeholders in today's educational enterprise and will be referenced throughout this book.

Justice is rooted in the fundamental idea of recognizing and doing what is right. The concept of justice is rooted in the notion of moral righteousness that is afforded to all people. The justice construct is anchored in the context of recognizing each person's humanity and providing the basic necessities that allow each person to be seen, heard, valued, and recognized. Justice is also connected to the idea of what education scholar Maisha Winn (2018) calls a paradigm shift that anchors justice as not just an idea, theory, or abstract concept but a way of being that informs our thoughts and actions in everyday practice. When I was younger, my mother would always tell my brother and me that while she wanted us to get good grades in school, she was more concerned with us being "good people" who would be "productive in the world." My mother would also say that the key to being a good person is to "just do what is right." I have always held that mantra close to my heart, to try my best to always do what is right. Whether helping those in need, speaking out against injustice, having hard conversations with peers and colleagues, or making challenging decisions in my current work, I frequently come back to my mother's charge about doing what is right. One of the ways that we can attain equity

in schools is to commit ourselves to doing what is right by students. Moreover, justice seeks a level of reciprocity, respect, and affirmation of the human condition, where people are treated with the honorable and principled decency that should be afforded to everyone in a democratic society (Winn & Winn, 2021). Every student in our schools deserves to have access to adults who will always do right by them. This is a core element of justice in this work—putting students first. Why justice, one might ask? Simply stated, justice serves as the foundation of a civilized and humane society. Ruha Benjamin (2022) calls for what she refers to as *viral justice*, which

> orients us differently towards small-scale, often localized actions. It invites us to witness how an idea of actions that sprouts in one place may be adopted, adapted, and diffused elsewhere. But it also counters the assumptions "scaling up" should always be the goal. (p. 19)

Every student in our schools deserves to have access to adults who will always do right by them. This is a core element of justice in this work—putting students first.

It is the localized actions that matter most for educators when it comes to equity. We may not be able to change systems immediately, but local acts and loving practices can happen every day and help us to achieve justice in meaningful and empowering ways. Cornel West (2008) advises us to "never forget justice is what love looks like in public" (p. 14). Educators must always think about what our love looks like in classrooms, in hallways, and in schools. Do students see, feel, and hear love in their daily activities? Do our practices demonstrate justice? Societies (and schools) without justice tend to be harsh, exclusionary, unloving, and unfair, often leading to deprivation and conflict as people fight for what they believe they are worthy of: equal treatment under the law. We hold up the rule of law and the ideal of justice as being blind to social status, wealth, or anything else. When it comes to justice in education, each day every person dedicated to the uplift and well-being of students should ask, "Am I being just to all of my students?" "Do I love the students that I teach?" "Are the policies in place just to all families?" "Do my students feel like this is a just and fair learning environment?" and "If not, what modifications am I willing to make in my school, classroom, or district for students to feel like justice is embedded in all we do?"

I remember teaching fifth graders in Compton, California, where I was a classroom teacher, and one of the things that I did daily was to greet my students at the door with a smile and a warm greeting and ask, "How are you doing today?" While that might seem like a small act, the action was rooted in justice by affirming the students' humanity to let them know that they were worthy of a smile and a greeting from their teachers every day. My students would come back to me years later and say that those daily greetings made them feel seen, valued, and cared for. Sometimes justice is rooted in the simplest and smallest acts.

Do students see, feel, and hear love in their daily activities?

I was fortunate enough to grow up in a household where both of my parents stressed the importance of doing right, and in the case of my father, he was keen on helping those in greatest need. I can recall Saturdays when my dad would awaken my brother and me early in the morning to go cut the grass in our yard, rake the leaves of neighbors with disabilities, or visit older or sick family members who lived alone or in nursing homes. We often brought food to those individuals who suffered from food insecurities. My father also told us to never look down on those who were unhoused or had mental health challenges, because we did not know their stories and with the slightest change of circumstances we could be one of them. My father would often tell us that in our working-class neighborhood of Compton, these were some of the hardest workers, and while they often did not get far, they never complained. Deeply embedded in my father's message was to help those who were greatest in need. He regularly talked to strangers on the street who were struggling, to make them feel humanized. He would easily reach for change in his pocket to help a struggling individual. Every summer, my father would send my brother and me to his tiny, rural hometown in Louisiana because he wanted us to be immersed in a community where people had very little but were proud, caring, loving, and hardworking; gave their last to others if they needed to; and always saw a connection between themselves and others. The values of giving, caring, hard work, loving, and helping others have remained etched in my mind and heart and shape so much of who I am and what I do today. In so many ways, this book is rooted in those ideas of justice that my parents instilled in my brother and me—to try to always do what is right and to always be mindful of those in greatest need. That is the conception of justice that anchors this book that is desperately needed

in schools today. *Do right by all students but pay particular attention to those in greatest need.*

Do right by all students but pay particular attention to those in greatest need.

The second foundational principle of the equity framework is *recognizing and repairing past harms*. A closer look at the groups today who need more equity-centered practice reveals their ties to a larger history of oppression, locally and globally. Take, for example, Indigenous children, who are consistently shown to be behind virtually all students when it comes to academic outcomes and who are frequently omitted from discussions around marginalized student populations because of their small numbers relative to other groups. To examine the realities of Indigenous children in isolation would ignore the atrocities that have been inflicted on Indigenous populations for centuries in this country (Lomawaima & Ostler, 2018). An equity-focused approach does not mean that teachers have the individual or collective power to undo what has been done to Indigenous communities or any other group, but it does mean they must recognize that today's conditions for them are connected to a larger history that cannot be ignored—a history that is rooted in genocide, deculturalization, and miseducation by way of Indian boarding schools (Pember, 2019). The recognition ideally should spark a paradigmatic shift in how we see student outcomes to a view that does not see students, their families, and their communities as the problem but sees what has been done to them as the problem. Such a paradigm shift then should help educators see themselves as partners with students, families, and communities to use education as a tool to repair harm through what education scholar Patrick Camangian (2019) calls "humanizing pedagogy" where teachers center three core ideas—(1) knowledge of self, (2) solidarity, and (3) self-determination—in their classrooms. This shift also asks teachers to not blame students for a history of exclusion, discrimination, inferior education, and displacement of communities. Similar to what many nations have done recently with atonement commissions, an equity-centered school focuses on recognizing and repairing past harms. Thus, there is less of a focus on punishment and discipline, and an intentionality on restoration and healing. A truth commission, also known as a truth and reconciliation commission or truth and justice commission, is tasked with discovering and revealing past wrongdoing by a government in the hope of resolving conflict left over from the past. South Africa and Canada are examples of countries that have recognized the atrocities inflicted upon certain native populations,

acknowledged wrongdoing, and made a collective commitment to undo and repair the harms and injustices of the past. But the acknowledgement is only one part, so it must be accompanied with certain actions, efforts, resources, or services to help make people whole. This is where schools come in; an equity-based education can play a vital role in helping to amend the past by providing education and not schooling. Education researcher Mwalimu Shujaa (1994) makes this distinction between education and schooling:

> Education is our means of providing for the intergenerational transmission of values, beliefs, customs, rituals, and sensibilities along with the knowledge of why these things must be sustained . . . the schooling process is designed to provide an ample supply of people who are loyal to the nation-state and who have learned the skills needed to perform the work that is necessary to maintain the dominance of the European-American elite in its social order. (p. 10)

Education that repairs past harms ensures that schools recognize the way many students' cultural, racial, gendered, and linguistic identities are often under assault explicitly and implicitly through school curriculum, policies, and practices. Equity-centered schools not only acknowledge the harm done to minoritized students, but they also actively seek to disrupt and repair the harm that schools have done to certain populations. Moreover, educators in equity-centered schools see the disparate outcomes of minoritized students not as being solely due to effort, achievement, and intelligence but as occurring within a larger historical context. Education scholar Gloria Ladson-Billings (2006) says that "our focus on the achievement gap is akin to a focus on the budget deficit, but what is happening to African American and Latina/o students is more like the national debt. We do not have an achievement gap; we have an education debt" (p. 5). The debt that Ladson-Billings refers to is what we must pay attention to in today's schools. Recognizing and repairing past harms requires being aware of the education debt faced by many students and structuring schools in a manner that seeks to eliminate gaps. Because past injustices have often left long-lasting harms on people, communities, and students, recognition of past harm is vital to achieving real equity in schools. Repair addresses:

- The survivor's need for healing. Survivors heal through the encounter and its outcomes.
- The offender's need to make amends, as offenders must atone for wrongdoing and work to regain good standing in

a particular community. Encounters empower offenders to make amends directly to survivors and potentially community members.

- The community's need for relational health and safety. Family, friends, and others support survivors and offenders as they heal and reintegrate into the community.

Who are the offenders and who are the survivors when it comes to educational equity? It is important for school officials to acknowledge and be aware that, beyond their control, schools have been one of the biggest sources of harm to many marginalized communities. In many ways, school practices, policies, and personnel have been and continue to be the offenders. And unfortunately, many educators are often guilty by association, though they may not have been active participants in that harm. Minoritized populations are the survivors of harm done intentionally and unintentionally by schools. Hence, school personnel must understand that much of the angst, anger, distrust, and dislike that some students have toward school is rooted in a historical memory of stories, episodes, acts of exclusion, and experiences of miseducation that have been shared by parents, grandparents, elders, community members, and survivors or that young people have witnessed firsthand. For schools to make equity a reality, a full reckoning of how to repair and redress harm is essential and will be discussed throughout this book.

Strategies that educators might take to heal students include:

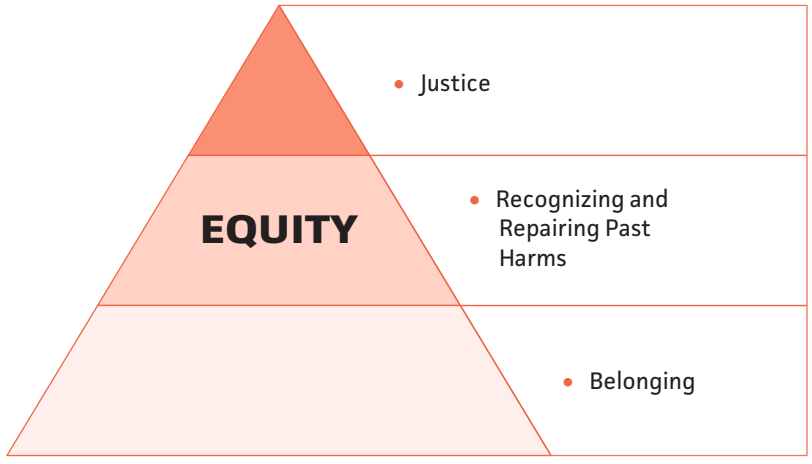
- Words of affirmation
- Acknowledging effort
- Being willing to apologize
- Identifying and verbalizing students' academic and social strengths
- Building healthy student–teacher relationships

The third foundational principle of the equity framework, the concept of *belonging*, is centered on the idea that equity should be more than an ideal—you must meet people where they are for them to get where they need to be. People want and need to be included, seen, heard, and valued. Our students want to feel like they belong. Often schools consciously and unconsciously cater to the middle or the center of where we think most

students are situated. Think of the typical bell curve where we frequently have outliers on both ends. A belonging framework is quite mindful of those on the margins or the tail ends of the bell curve and seeks to structure beliefs, practices, and policies that are always mindful of how our actions affect those on the margins. Belonging is predicated on the idea that no one is left behind, excluded, overlooked, or rendered invisible. Equity is not possible without belonging. Belonging cannot be attained without equity. Belonging is rooted in the idea that an individual has a persistent feeling of security and support, and that there is a sense of acceptance or membership in a group or community. Belonging tells students that they matter, and truly belonging means that students feel a sense of belonging that is unwavering and not only recognizes but affirms their identities and contributions toward being a part of something bigger than themselves.

We cannot create equitable schools without being ever mindful of how we ensure that all students have access to opportunities and resources that they might otherwise be excluded from, such as students who come from low socioeconomic backgrounds, students of color, students who are linguistically gifted (multilingual learners), students who are gender nonconforming, and LGBTQ+ students, as well as students with physical or intellectual disabilities and members of other minority groups. Belonging would be mindful of the exclusion of Muslim students in schools in various ways. In practical terms, in everything that I seek to lay out in this book, readers should be thinking, "Who might be excluded?" "Are we including all stakeholders?" "Does this policy make it harder for certain populations of students and their families?" "Who has been historically excluded?" "Does every family feel like they belong as part of a school community?" "Is this fair to everyone?" Belonging seeks to make sure that there are no discriminatory practices and there is a concerted effort to remove barriers that prevent anyone from full participation in school opportunities. Belonging would speak out against and put an end to the surveillance, criminalization, and punishment of disproportionate numbers of Black and Brown students; these same students are disproportionately suspended and expelled from schools—actions that are catalysts for the school-to-prison pipeline in our country. Belonging would repudiate acts of antisemitism. An authentic approach to equity is about making schools welcoming places for all students, regardless of their differences. Education scholar Jeff Duncan-Andrade (2022) states that equity "is what is fair and right" (p. 16).

FIGURE 1.1 ● Equity Framework



Equality says provide everyone the same thing. Equity says meet people where they are.

EQUITY NOW AND WHY IT MATTERS

For the purposes of this book, equity is defined as providing the necessary supports, interventions, and actions to correct past wrongs with the goal of justice and belonging for all students. Moreover, here equity is defined as the approaches, actions, or ideals of being just, impartial, and fair to create equal opportunity for all students. Simply stated, equality is our goal, and equity is the mechanism or process that we use to get there. We need equity now. We are losing too many students to inequitable schooling policies and practices. We need to act with an intense, unapologetic, and intentional sense of urgency to create equitable schools. Our students need it; our students deserve it. As mentioned in the framework, equity is synonymous with fairness and justice. It is rooted in the idea that past harms and actions have created inequities that require additional, and at times compensatory, actions. Equity also operates from the standpoint that we need to meet people where they are to get them where they want and need to be, and one of the essential ways of doing that is through belonging. Moreover, it is helpful to think of equity as not simply a desired state of affairs or a lofty value. To create equity in schools and classrooms we must think about it as more of a structural and systemic concept. There have been countless numbers of books about equity. What makes this book different, one might ask? Many of the books written about equity have been

largely conceptual and theoretical, which leaves many leaders and practitioners wanting more clarity. I frequently have had school practitioners ask me, "But what does equity look like in the classroom?" I have had school leaders ask, "But can you give me examples of what equity looks like in a school?" This book seeks to answer those questions and more. This book will provide examples and strategies of what equity looks like in classrooms and in schools. This book seeks to be much more practical than most other books about equity. This book seeks to identify those educational structures, policies, practices, and procedures that work to either dismantle inequity or uphold it. Equity cannot and should not be thought about as simple acts or lessons that are done on a given day. Equity at its core must be seen as a way of being, integral to our core values—our thoughts, acts, or ideas that emanate in how we live our daily lives. Another way of thinking about equity is in how we might parent our own children. For many parents/caregivers, we may recognize that our children have different needs. Equality would suggest that we give all our children the same thing, but that often does not work. I have four children (who are all grown now), but having three sons and one daughter, I would frequently observe how different they were in so many ways. My oldest and youngest son frequently needed little attention from my wife and me. They were introverts by nature, very much kept to themselves, and did not socialize a lot unless prompted. My middle son and daughter were quite to the contrary. Much more social and extroverted, they thrived on social interactions, were social butterflies, could light up rooms, and had very different social needs. If my approach as a parent were to ask all four of my children to talk more, socialize more, and be more extroverted, that would not have worked for two of my sons, because that is not what they needed. Equity says to observe, listen, and learn from our students, then meet them where they are; it is unfair to ask students to be something that they are not, or to demonstrate mastery of skills that they were never taught, but to be nimble and flexible in meetings. In short, equity matters for many reasons, seven of which will be woven throughout this book:

- Students deserve equity now.
- Diversity demands equitable education.
- Equity is rooted in justice.
- Equity seeks to address past harms and injuries.
- Equity challenges us to do education, not schooling.
- Belonging is vital to create equitable schools.
- Equity is the just and right thing to do.

Equity cannot and should not be thought about as simple acts or lessons that are done on a given day. Equity at its core must be seen as a way of being, integral to our core values—our thoughts, acts, or ideas that emanate in how we live our daily lives.

UNPACKING EQUALITY

In this book I make the stance that equality should be our goal as educators, yet equity can and should be our pathway to achieve equality. Equity involves trying to understand and give people what they need to enjoy full, healthy, and fulfilling lives. Equality, in contrast, aims to ensure that everyone gets the same things to enjoy full, healthy lives. If we were all the same, perhaps achieving equality would not be so elusive. Yet as students become increasingly diverse in our nation's schools, a one-size-fits-all approach simply will not work, much in the same way that it would not have worked for my four children. Nearly every educator wants their students to be successful, healthy, and thriving in all aspects of their lives, and few can argue against equality as an end goal. But equality can only promote fairness and justice if everyone starts from the same place and needs the same things. Unfortunately, that is simply not the case. The Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity (2013) defines equity as

> the intentional belonging of everyone in society. Equity is achieved when systemic, institutional, and historical barriers based on race, gender, sexual orientation and other identities are dismantled and no longer determine socioeconomic, education and health outcomes.

In schools, students arrive with a diverse set of strengths, skills, and abilities, but also with diverse needs. One of the reasons why teaching is one of the most demanding and intellectually and emotionally exhausting jobs is that educators have to assess students' strengths and needs on a daily basis. As mentioned before, if equality is our goal and equity is our pathway to get there, it requires a mindset shift of adults who serve students every day. I will talk more about why a mindset shift is required later in this book. Another example that I frequently use involves restrooms in public spaces. I have more than once been with my wife at a concert or sporting event where we both take a bathroom break. My wife always laments about how long the women's restroom line is compared to the men's. I frequently go in and come out in no time flat

while my wife waits in line with 20–25 women in front of her. When we see these long lines for women's restrooms, we do not say, "If women just worked harder, their lines would not be so long." We would never say that if women demonstrated greater grit while in their stalls, there would no lines. We do not suggest that men just work harder or a smarter, and that is why they do not have long lines. We recognize that when it comes to restrooms in most public spaces, the needs of men are different than the needs of women. Hence, a *one restroom for men–one restroom for women* approach (equality) does not work for women. While the restrooms available are equal, such an approach does not consider the unique needs of one group compared to the other. The women are not the problem; the structure of available restrooms is the problem. So, what if we had four restrooms for women and one restroom for men? It would not be equal, but it would respond more to the needs of women. Perhaps, the greater goal is to create gender-neutral restrooms where no one waits in line or everyone waits in line in equal ways. But what if we used a similar approach with our students and said it is not the students' lack of effort and grit that explains inequalities; what if the structures are the problem? What if it is the mindsets, attitudes, beliefs, practices, policies, and pedagogies in schools that are the problem? And what if we sought to change them as opposed to changing students? Such a very different approach would require very different approaches to address the problem.

Understanding the root causes of educational disparities in outcomes for today's students is essential. While many practitioners ask why root causes are necessary, it is important to note that our understanding of root causes usually informs our reaction or response to the current-day disparities. If a teacher notices that a student appears disengaged and attributes the student's behavior to a lack of care about their education, it could easily be met with an amount of indifference from the teacher, such as the typical "If the student doesn't care, then why should I?" However, if that teacher approaches the same student and asks why she does not seem to be engaged in doing work today, and the student responds by saying that she has been having a hard time focusing because she and her family have been experiencing homelessness and have been living in her mom's car the last few days, the teacher's response may be different. Again, root causes matter. In today's increasingly diverse context for young people, it is crucial to recognize that an equity-based focus on teaching and learning requires an understanding of who students are, the circumstances that they are currently dealing with, and the people in their lives who are helping (or not) to navigate those circumstances.

Much of what happens in many schools today, especially with students of color and students from low-income backgrounds, is that a deficit-based mentality exists that sees students and their families as the reasons for their own less-than-ideal circumstances. Hence, the effort that is dedicated to students is muted because the idea is that people need to make better choices, need better values, or lack a sound work ethic and motivation.

ALL HANDS ON DECK

A critical concept of this book is that everyone can play a role in the creation and maintenance of equity-based schooling. Doing equity-based work is not a function of one's title, one's credentialing, one's years of experience in the field, or one's pay scale. Individuals at the district level, at the schoolhouse, in the classroom, on the playground, at the bus stop, or in the cafeteria; school counselors; and persons in the front office or at after-school programs can all play a role. Custodial staff can be just as impactful as classroom teachers. The school nurse can be equally as supportive of students as the principal. Bus drivers, cafeteria workers, instructional aides, paraprofessionals, and front-office staff all have the potential to be change agents for students, and many do that every day in schools across the country. This book seeks to highlight the collective and collaborative nature of how equity can and should work for all students. One of the reasons why many equity efforts fall short is that such efforts are often taken up by a small cadre of individuals, while others assume that it is not their responsibility or duty. To be clear, creating equitable schools is everyone's responsibility or duty. Recently, a number of districts have hired equity coordinators, or diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) directors who are tasked with the work of equity. It is also important to note that many DEI efforts are under attack in cities and states across the country. Many states have banned DEI trainings and workshops because they are viewed as divisive to some. Such positions are important and can play an important role in school transformation. However, frequently, these positions have little power or authority and limited resources, and the district places what should be an organizational effort on the shoulders of one person or office. Efforts such as these often result in burnout of the lone DEI champion and are frequently doomed to fail. They almost invariably have limited impact, because they are typically seen as outside of the structure of schools, as opposed to being an integral part of how an entire district or school operates. Jamila Dugan (2021) writes about what she calls "equity traps and tropes" that provide an

excellent overview of what many schools must be aware of when engaging this work.

- **"Doing" Equity:** Sometimes educators treat equity as a series of tools, strategies, and compliance tasks versus a whole-person, whole-system change process linked to culture, identity, and healing.
- **Siloing Equity:** Look at the strategic plans of many organizations and schools working toward equity. You will likely find a policy, a new "equity" vision statement, or a newly formed task force designed to increase equitable outcomes.
- **The Equity Warrior:** The Equity Warrior is an incredible educator, often treated as a martyr to the work. This person is eager to push their colleagues and school forward and willing to take on significant additional work to bring the team along. Unfortunately, the Equity Warrior can easily become the default holder of the school or system's vision for equity, allowing colleagues to opt out, stay inside their comfort zones, or refuse to invest in their own equity learning, which is critical to the change effort
- **Spray-and-Pray Equity:** Many school leaders are convinced that if they just get the right trainer, everything will be "fixed." The staff will become more equity centered. A common refrain we (as trainers ourselves) hear is "If we just train our teachers around their implicit biases, then they will treat students better."
- **Superficial Equity:** Superficial equity essentially amounts to grasping any equity-centered practice with little understanding of its origins, its purpose, and how to engage in it with depth and authenticity
- **Boomerang Equity:** Boomerang equity may be one of the hardest traps of all to disrupt. It feeds itself back to the econometric, test-driven education frame we seek to dismantle.

Do any of these traps and tropes sound familiar? Are they playing out in your school or district? If so, it's time to reconsider your efforts. It is never too late to take an honest inventory of your individual practice or the policies and practices of your building or system in the interest of addressing a simple but fundamental question: *How can we be better?* Similarly, we must have the courage to confront both the quantitative and qualitative data that tell the story of who is benefiting and who is not. Education scholar H. Rich Milner (2020) says it best: "Start where you are, but don't stay there" (p. 5).

WHO ARE WE SERVING TODAY? THE DIVERSITY–EQUITY REALITY

In doing the work of equity it is essential to understand the diverse makeup of our clientele—students. Equity is about tailoring our efforts based on the needs, complexities, and identities of students who enter schools. Today's schools are becoming more diverse with each passing day, and this dramatic transformation will have an impact on schools and ultimately our society for decades to come. In short, diversity is here to stay, and this is precisely why equity must be front and center in our work in schools. To be clear, equity is not a one-size-fits-all approach; what works in one district, classroom, or school may not work in another. Yet, at the same time, there are core practices that will have utility for all students. The work of equity is complex, complicated, and challenging. So, let's start with a snapshot of who our students are in 2021–2022. In fall 2021, close to 50 million students were enrolled in public schools in prekindergarten to Grade 12 across the United States (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2022). Of the 49.4 million public school students, consider a snapshot of who they are:

- 32.6 million attended prekindergarten to Grade 8.
- 15.4 million attended Grades 9 to 12.

It should be noted that these numbers refer to students enrolled in public schools only in the United States (including charters). In fall 2019, approximately 5.5 million students attended private schools (NCES, 2022). This estimate includes prekindergarten enrollment in schools that offer kindergarten or a higher grade. When we disaggregate these data by racial/ethnic groups, we quickly see that today's schools are more diverse than ever in our nation's history; of the 49.4 million students enrolled in public schools from prekindergarten through Grade 12 in 2020–2021:

- 22.4 million were White (45%)
- 14.1 million were Latinx (Hispanic) (28%)
- 7.4 million were Black (14%)
- 2.7 million were Asian American (5%)
- 2.3 million were of two or more races (4.6%)
- 0.5 million were American Indian/Alaska Native students (1%)
- 0.2 million were Pacific Islander students (0.5%)

Many of today's conversations tied to equity have an explicit focus on improving the educational experiences and outcomes of students of color and, in particular, Native American, African American, Pacific Islander, and Latinx students (T. C. Howard, 2020). Given the fact that students of color now make up a majority of students in U.S. public schools, a deep analysis and understanding about how schools respond to increasingly racial, ethnic, cultural, and linguistic diversity is essential. I will discuss the reality of today's racial and ethnic demographics throughout the book.

STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

When discussing equity, one of the largest student groups that must be served includes students with disabilities. Enacted in 1975, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), formerly known as the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, mandates the provision of a free and appropriate public school education for eligible students ages 3–21. Eligible students are those identified by a team of professionals as having a disability that adversely affects academic performance and as being in need of special education and related services. Data collection activities to monitor compliance with IDEA began in 1976. From school years 2009–2010 through 2020–2021, the number of students ages 3–21 who received special education services under IDEA increased from 6.5 million, or 13% of total public school enrollment, to 7.2 million, or 15% of total public school enrollment. It is important to note that a number of scholars have raised important questions and brought considerable attention to the overrepresentation of students of color who are identified with disabilities and special educational referrals (Harry & Klinger, 2014). Schools cannot have an equity focus if there are not authentic considerations for students with disabilities.

LANGUAGE LEARNERS

Students who are identified as English learners (ELs) can participate in language assistance programs in schools to help ensure that they attain English proficiency and meet the academic content and achievement standards expected of all students. Participation in language programs can play a vital role in improving students' English language proficiency, which can increase equitable outcomes for students whose first language is not English, which in turn has been associated with improved educational outcomes. The percentage of public school students in the United States who were ELs or

linguistically gifted increased between fall 2010 (9.2%, or 4.5 million students) and fall 2019 (10.4%, or 5.1 million students). Spanish was the home language of 3.9 million EL public school students in fall 2019, representing 75.7% percent of all EL students and 7.9% of all public school students. Arabic was the second most reported home language (spoken by 131,600 students). English was the third most common home language for EL students (105,300 students), which may reflect students who live in multilingual households or students adopted from other countries who were raised speaking another language but currently live in households where English is spoken. Chinese (100,100 students), Vietnamese (75,600 students), Portuguese (44,800 students), Russian (39,700 students), Haitian (31,500 students), Hmong (30,800 students), and Korean (25,800 students) were the next most reported home languages of EL students in fall 2019. Language is an essential part of culture and students' identities, and some programs are designed to be *subtractive*, meaning their goal is to replace students' home languages with English without any effort to preserve and strengthen the home language. Students who are asked to suppress, change, or dismiss their native language are placed at significant risk for school failure (Martinez, 2018). The United States also continues to see a massive influx of immigrant students who have complex language and learning needs that districts and schools must respond to in an equity-based manner (Suarez-Orozco & Michikiyan, 2016). Given the growing numbers of students who come from linguistically diverse backgrounds, any equity focus that districts and schools take must be serious about a robust engagement of programs and interventions to support linguistically gifted students.

STUDENTS LIVING IN POVERTY

Poverty continues to be one of the biggest challenges to equity in our nation. Growing up in poverty is one of the greatest threats to healthy child development and academic success (Milner, 2015). The effects of economic hardship, particularly deep and persistent poverty, can disrupt children's cognitive development, physical and mental health, educational success, and other life outcomes (Gorski, 2018). These impacts reverberate throughout adulthood. Child poverty, calculated by the Supplemental Poverty Measure (SPM), fell to its lowest recorded level in 2021, declining 46% from 9.7% in 2020 to 5.2% in 2021, according to the U.S. Census Bureau (Creamer et al., 2022). However, now childhood poverty is on the rise. The recent elimination of the Child Tax Credit (CTC) program has caused the number of children living in poverty to spike

to 12.4% or approximately 9 million children. Young people need to have their basic needs met to be healthy and whole when they enter school. The official poverty measure, on the other hand, is based on pretax cash income. In 2021, the official poverty level was $27,479 for a family of two adults and two children. Families can earn well over this amount and still struggle to meet their basic needs, especially in high-cost areas such as Los Angeles, San Francisco, Miami, and New York. Though there have been downturns in childhood poverty over the last few years, there is a disproportionate number of youth of color who continue to live in poverty compared to white students. Consider the following statistics from 2021:

- 8.2% of white families lived in poverty.
- 17.0% of Latinx families lived in poverty.
- 19.5% of Black families lived in poverty.
- 8.1% of Asian families lived in poverty.
- 24.3% of Native American/Alaska Native families lived in poverty.

It is also worth noting that while poverty affects millions of students every day in this country, the condensed and segregated nature of students growing up in poverty cannot be understated. Gary Orfield (2022) has documented how racial segregation in the nation's schools is just as prevalent today as it was in the 1960s and has important implications for students of color and access to higher education. Moreover, current data highlight that for many schools and districts across the United States, there has been persistent, generational poverty. It is not uncommon to find students today who attend the same schools that their parents, grandparents, or even great grandparents attended decades earlier, especially in urban and rural communities. For example, the percentage of students who attended high-poverty schools was highest for Black students (45%), followed by Latinx (Hispanic) students (43%), Native American/Alaska Native students (37% percent), Pacific Islander students (25%), students of two or more races (17%), Asian students (14%), and white students (8%). At the other end of the school poverty spectrum, a nearly opposite pattern is evident. The percentage of students who attended low-poverty schools was highest for Asian students (40%), followed by white students (30%), students of two or more races (24%), Pacific Islander students (12%), Native American/Alaska Native students (8%), Latinx (Hispanic) students (8% percent), and Black students (7%).

Equity efforts must be prepared to address the complexities of today's students' realities. Perhaps no issue is more prevalent in this fight than childhood poverty. The ramifications for students are deep and wide, and significant investments are required at the local, county, state, and national levels to dismantle the seemingly insurmountable obstacles that poverty presents for millions of children in this country. There is also a need for equity to take an intersectional lens to recognize particular groups are at even greater disadvantages compared to others. Legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) has talked about intersections as a layered and cumulative way that the effects of different forms of discrimination combine or overlap. In other words, her contention is that we cannot look at identities in narrow and discrete categories and fully understand them (e.g., white women, Black men). She contends that different forms of discrimination and systems of oppression do not exist in a vacuum: For those who embody different marginalized identities, they often overlap and amplify each other to create a unique experience of discrimination that is more than just the sum of its parts. Therefore, when talking about poverty, an intersectional framing asks us to think about what poverty means for a young girl who is a Latina immigrant, who may have a disability, and who may not have been raised in an English-speaking home. How and why would her lived experiences be fundamentally different from the experiences of, say, a white male who is growing up in poverty? The complexity of intersecting identities cannot be stressed enough.

Educators should be aware of how these identities and corresponding systems of oppression intersect in the lives of students. Reflect, for a moment, on how schooling may play out in the life of a white male who is poor and experiencing homelessness. Now contrast this experience with that of a young mixed-race girl who is transgender and living in an affluent community. As we learn to frame our own and our students' experiences through an equity lens, we fine-tune our understanding of how these layers of identity and their corresponding systems of oppression impact the experience of school, and we further appreciate why a one-size approach cannot work—whether in a large comprehensive public school district or a small, private, or independent school. Our approach must be measured, tailored, mindful of historical disadvantages and current realities, aware of the nature of generational poverty, conscious of racial disparities and the multiple identities our students possess, and committed to recognizing that assisting the most vulnerable students helps support all students. At the end of each chapter, I will lay out the equity framework of justice, repairing harm, and

belonging to offer tips to generate ideas, lead discussions, or offer practical strategies that can become actionable for individuals or organizations.

THE CURRENT POLITICAL MOMENT

I would be remiss if I did not mention that I am writing this book at a time that the United States continues to become increasingly polarized. The partisan politics in our society that have permeated schools have made the political climate in education an unhealthy one for many students. From bans on discussions of DEI, limiting teaching in classrooms about race and racism, to denying students' rights to self-define and honor their gender, schools are quickly becoming unsafe places for countless numbers of young people. This book calls for equity now because schools are supposed to be places where students are encouraged to laugh, learn, explore, be affirmed, experience joy, experiment, be creative, imagine, dream, meet and learn about people from diverse backgrounds, and grow academically, socially, emotionally, and psychologically. However, the current political climate in schools in many ways is infringing on students' rights to know the country's true history, and it is allowing the vocal minority to show up at school boards and dictate an agenda that affects all students. In many ways, the current educational terrain is frightening and outright harmful for students. At a time when students' mental health, psychosocial well-being, and sense of self are becoming increasingly fragile, the current political moment is contributing to higher levels of stress, depression, anger, and anxiety for many students. Equity now is needed because we need bold leadership, courageous adults, and caring individuals to stand up to the current political moment to say that students should always be first. *Students should always be first.* All that is done in schools should be done with students being the number-one priority. I understand many adults want what they believe is best for their children and adolescents. And I respect the rights of parents/caregivers. But this current moment should call on all adults to be introspective; to be respectful of different viewpoints, perspectives, and lived realities; and to listen to young people. We may not always understand and agree with what young people are saying, but they are growing up in times that we as adults did not. Equity now is needed because we are witnessing the most intelligent, creative, and compassionate group of young people the world has known. They care deeply about the climate, they are more accepting of differences, and they desire a world that respects their right to self-expression, voice, and choice. Let us not be

the adults who douse their burning flames to create a better world. Let's do equity now so that all students can live to reach their highest potential.

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Equity Now Charts

To make the equity principles accessible to education leaders and practitioners, the *equity now* charts offer ways for readers to identify and demonstrate how justice, repairing harm, and belonging (the three theoretical anchors of the book) can be embedded in the ideals, practices, and policies in districts, schools, classrooms, and communities. The aim of these charts is to provide educators with actionable items that can be used to create equity now. The charts also provide a template for what parents/caregivers and school personnel can use to analyze to what degree school districts and individual school sites are enacting equity. The practices and policies in the charts are not meant to be prescriptive but are offered as general principles to be applied with the given context to create more equitable schools.

JUSTICE	REPAIR	BELONGING
• Recognizing the changing ethnic, racial, and cultural demographics in a school or district	• Acknowledging that low performances of racial/ethnic groups are rooted in historical trauma and disadvantage	• Creating curriculum and instructional strategies that reflect diverse ways of knowing, thinking, and communicating
• Providing more resources (human and fiscal) to schools and districts that have a larger number of students from low-income backgrounds	• Providing students from low-income backgrounds with the strongest and most skilled teachers • Avoiding placing inexperienced or ineffective teachers with students who are behind academically	• Consistently changing the narrative in schools about what students from low-income backgrounds do not have to what they do have • Moving from deficit discourse and practice to asset-based discourse and practice

JUSTICE	REPAIR	BELONGING
• Accurately identifying students who are language learners	• Affirming and maintaining students' native tongue • Providing adequate support to English learners • Reclassifying regularly and providing rigor in courses that are taught in students' home language	• Ensuring that classroom and school walls have a diversity of languages displayed • Honoring and celebrating languages other than English throughout the school

Questions for Consideration

1. Has my district started discussions or taken steps toward developing and implementing an equity plan?
2. How have the demographics changed in my district and community over the last five years?
3. Who are the student groups in greatest need of more equitable supports and services?
4. What additional supports are in place in my district for students living in poverty?
5. What evidence do we have to suggest whether the current supports are working?
6. How, if at all, have stakeholder groups been a part of our equity efforts?
7. Why might there be resistance to discussions and actions connected to equity?

Recommendations for Reading and Resources

1. Milner, H. R. (2020) 2nd ed. *Start where you are, but don't stay there.* Harvard Education Press.
2. Frey, W. (2018). *Diversity explosion: How new racial demographics are remaking America.* Brookings Institution.
3. Spring, J. (2022). *Deculturalization and the struggle for equability* (9th ed.). Routledge.
4. Muhammad, G. (2020). *Awakening the genius: An equity framework for culturally and historically responsive literacy.* Scholastic.

5. Duncan-Andrade, J. M. R. (2022). *Equality or equity*. Harvard Education Press.
6. Winn, M. (2018). *Justice on both sides*. Harvard Education Press.
7. Morris, M. (2018). *Pushout: The criminalization of Black girls in schools*. New Press.