The Culturally Competent Educator

Dedication

To my third grade teacher, Mrs. Gowdy, who saw my potential in 1970 and opened doors I didn't know existed.
You personalized my learning journey, pushing boundaries and lifting limits, showing me how far I could truly soar.
Your gift of differentiated instruction, before it had a name, shaped not only my future but the educator I became.

The Culturally Competent Educator

Connecting Equitable Practices for Instruction, Assessment, and Grading

Almitra L. Berry

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Almitra L. Berry, EdD, is the CEO, founder, and principal consultant of ALBerry Consulting, Incorporated. She is a nationally recognized speaker, author, and consultant on the topic of culturally and linguistically diverse learners in America's K–12 education system. Her research focuses on equity and academic achievement in majority-of-color, low-wealth, large, urban school districts.

Dr. Berry is author of the book *Effecting Change for Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Learners*, which addresses the educational needs for culturally and linguistically diverse learners, focusing heavily on provision gaps, equity, and addressing related challenges during the coronavirus pandemic.

She is a graduate of the University of California, Davis, holding a BA in political science/public administration. She holds an MEd in curriculum and instruction and an EdD in educational leadership with a specialization in curriculum and instruction. She has held multiple credentials, including a California reading endorsement, language development specialist (LDS), and bilingual/cross-cultural language acquisition and development (CLAD/BCLAD) for Spanish language instruction.

Dr. Berry has worked with educators, leaders, and school boards throughout the United States. She has presented at scores of state, national, and international conferences on the topics of equity, leadership, curriculum reform, and meeting the needs of historically underserved and disenfranchised learners.

Her work aims to introduce educators to a culturally relevant pragmatism that regards the culturally and linguistically diverse learner as one who brings to school a divergent order of reality. That reality influences the culture of school, the equity of policy, and the efficacy of instructional methods. She calls upon educators and educational leaders to evaluate policy, curriculum, instruction, supervision, and professional learning with a lens focused on equity.

INTRODUCTION

Over the last thirty-one years, I have had the pleasure, the honor, and the privilege to provide instruction to some of the most marginalized learners in our schools and to those who serve them. As a classroom educator, I had my 30 to 150 learners each year. As a consultant, I have served countless schools, districts, and classrooms. But no matter how many schools I work with, there always seems to be a need to keep doing the "on-the-ground" work.

There are always more instructors and administrators who need guidance in providing equitable instruction to children. This being the case, I decided it was time to once again put pen to paper (or keystrokes to screen) to reach a broader audience.

I use the word *learner* and the term *provide instruction* with specific intent. Because I am not a *teacher*, but rather an *educator.*

Let's unpack that, shall we?

In my final years as a classroom educator, I based my spelling instruction in word morphology. I knew that my sixth graders were learners of color from homes of low financial wealth, an impactful **comorbidity** resulting from a confluence of social, economic, racial, cultural, and linguistic factors. Providing instruction in word morphology gave them an opportunity to apply their knowledge of roots and affixes to more words than any other method. So, let's use that same approach here.

comorbidity—in school demographics, the presence of two unalterable demographic markers in a learner that have historically impacted academic success through no fault of the learner

The word *learner* comes from the verb *learn*. One who learns is a learner. A learner gains or acquires knowledge or skills by study, experience, or being taught. Study and experience are active, being taught is passive. I argue that people, both children and adults,

who actively participate in instructional activities have higher outcomes. Learners engage in instruction, they do not simply sit and receive it or just *get taught, told, trained.*

The word *teacher* is rooted in the verb *to teach*, which means "to give instruction." The affix *–er* means "one who." *Teach* is rooted in an Old English word that means to "show, present, or point out." So, a *teacher* is *one who shows, presents,* or *points out.* Teaching, then, is unidirectional or one-sided, as if I have all the knowledge and information to impart to my learners and they have nothing to give back to me. The idea that people, both children and adults, are merely empty vessels into which we can pour information exudes elitism.

Nothing could be further from the truth.

In this resource, I primarily use the word *educator*. It comes from the Latin word *educare*, which means to "lead out." Once again, the affix *–or* means *one who.* An educator guides. They lead their learners out of one state toward another. It may be from a lack of knowledge of how to read, write, think, or calculate to a state of literacy and numeracy. It could be out of a state of not knowing history or science or a world language and into one where they can make sense of worlds past, present, and future, by integrating the knowledge gained from a study of these subjects. Where you do find the word *teacher* in this book, note the context. There is a reason for its use in those instances.

Educating is an active relationship between two parties: the educator and those the educator leads. And true educators can only lead when learners in their classrooms choose to learn, to follow. Put a pin in that, it will make complete sense in another chapter or two.

As an educator, I have much to learn from those I instruct. This is how I am able to provide the instruction learners need; not simply provide information I want to give.

I was first called an equity warrior many years ago by a superintendent who was referring to my unrelenting passion to hold those in power accountable to meeting the needs of every child. This was long before the term *equity* was popularized and became the "in" thing in education and was demonized by those who seek to oppress our marginalized culturally and linguistically diverse learners.

Over time, I've come to define and identify the characteristics of **equity warriors**, those who I greet and salute in every episode of my podcast *Educational Equity Emancipation.* Are you an equity warrior? How many of these characteristics do you possess?

- **Promoter of Fairness:** actively working to ensure that resources, opportunities, and advantages are distributed fairly among all individuals and groups in your district, school, or classroom.
- **Challenger of Bias and Discrimination:** actively working against biases, prejudices, and discrimination; advocating for those who may be disadvantaged because of their race, gender, socioeconomic status, ability, or other marginalized identity.
- **Seeker of Systemic Change:** recognizing that many inequities are rooted in systemic and structural issues, actively seeking changes in policies and systems, not just individual behaviors or attitudes.
- **Lifelong Learner:** committed to continually learning and educating yourself about issues related to equity and social justice, especially in public schools and as related to children.
- **Active Ally:** standing up for and supporting marginalized groups; working to use whatever privilege you hold to effect positive change.
- **Striver of Inclusion and Representation:** striving for diverse and inclusive representation in all areas, such as curricular materials, instructional methodologies, decision-making processes, policy development, and leadership roles.

equity warrior—one who actively advocates for equity; one who works to ensure no person, especially no child, is disadvantaged by prejudice or bias

This Book Is for You

Yes, you. I wrote this book not only for the educators, but for the teachers, in the hopes that they will become educators. I wrote it for the school and district administrators who already serve as or are considering becoming instructional leaders, not merely managers. I wrote it for those still in college who are exploring careers as educators and for those transitioning from paraprofessional roles into classroom instructor positions. And yes, for the professors and practicum supervisors who support that work. Each of you has a responsibility to provide instruction: to children in classrooms, to adults in professional learning and development, to those you lead, and to your peers in day-to-day discussions about what's happening in your classrooms.

There's another term you will read frequently in this text: *provide instruction*. *Provide* comes from two Latin words: *pro–* "before" and *videre* "to see." To provide is "to see before." Instruct comes from two Latin words also: *in–* "upon or towards" and *struere* "pile up." The affixes *–ion, –tion,* and *–sion* all do the same thing. They are often added to verbs and form nouns of action. Instruction is literally *piling upon*. So when we provide instruction, we take part in an act that piles upon our learners that which we know they need because we see the needs before us.

I am not a teacher. I am an educator. I see the needs of the learners in front of me. This extends beyond the academics, to an understanding of who they are as whole people. I make myself aware of their languages, their cultures, their lived experiences (including their prior experiences in our classrooms), all that they bring with them, to give them what they need in order to be successful: socially, behaviorally, and academically.

Working through this book will improve your ability to see the complex and comprehensive needs of your learners (children or adults!) and give them what they need to be successful. Through your learning, you'll not only work to build success for others, but for yourself as well. You will become a better, more skilled, and more culturally competent educator.

Why Equitable Classroom Practices?

As an educator, I have witnessed tremendous inequities over the last twenty-odd years, particularly when coaching others in providing instruction in English (and Spanish) language arts and literacy to marginalized learners. These inequities are often rooted in implicit bias, presenting themselves in subtle, and sometimes not-so-subtle, ways. They present in words spoken, gestures used, attitudes taken by *teachers* and administrators. Not educators, teachers. Not educational leaders, administrators. They present in policies and practices that uphold educational caste systems where marginalized learners are forever seen as unable to achieve. Personally flawed. Uneducable. They present when adults dismiss poor outcomes with a shrug of the shoulders and blame the victims saying, "Well, those kids . . ."

Author's Perspective: White in America

Though not a race nor an ethnicity, I use the term *White* as I use the terms *Black, Latine, Indigenous*, and *Asian American*. I reference *White European* as a culture, although there is no singular culture. Just as there is no singular Asian American culture, or one of any other broad racial or ethnic group. I make the distinction to identify a group of people in the United States whose ancestors may have immigrated to the United States from any number of European nations. Why?

Because one's typical lived experience in the United States is distinctly different based on the history of who holds social and political power in the country. Since the United States became a country, power has been held first by people of English or British ancestry, then by people who came from (or whose ancestors came from) other Western European countries whose physical characteristics allowed them to present as physically similar to those with English ancestry. Most notably, the presence of fair, or "white" skin.

Like it or not, we are each given a label of race. Isabel Wilkerson wrote, "While the requirements to qualify as white have changed over the centuries . . . what lies beneath each label is centuries of history and assigning of assumptions and values to physical features in a structure of human hierarchy" (Wilkerson, 2020, pp. 18–19).

Like it or not, admit it or not, we all see color. There is no such thing as racial colorblindness. We all see characteristics of human beings: from skin tone to hair color to height, weight, gender, etc. But in the United States, those with white skin benefit from the power that the country's history, and the history of European colonialism of Black and Brown countries, afford it.

The difference in the lived experiences of White Americans, regardless of their ancestral origins, lies in the fact that is easy for them to assimilate into the social and political power dynamic because of the country's systemic and institutional racism that assigns human value based on race.

Culture is defined as the information, norms, values, behavior, and morals of a group. Culture lies in beliefs and systems transmitted socially not genetically. The politically powerful define and promote what they deem to be positive aspects of the dominant, or White, culture. And they publicly ascribe to and promote it as the norm for the United States. The existence of that White American culture does not require all White people to consciously ascribe or contribute to it.

Just as what is perceived by the politically and socially dominant group as Black, Latine, Asian American, or Indigenous culture does not require all people of those groups to consciously ascribe to their perceived culture. White American norms and the perceived superiority that they promote have become so infused into the fabric of American society, that those who present as White benefit by association based on skin color.

Since I was a marginalized learner with multiple comorbidities, I recognize from a very personal place, as well as an academic place, the damage that inequity does. And that is just one of the many reasons why I am committed to helping others understand how *what* we teach and *how* we teach it is critical. It's critical if we desire to be educators, not teachers. It is critical if we believe that every child deserves a high-quality education that will lead to the opportunity for them to become whoever they choose to become.

Inequitable practices result in low achievement. Low achievement relegates children to lives of social and economic disadvantage. It fuels the school to prison pipeline. It results in poorer health and shorter lives.

It is my hope, that as you not only read, but learn through engaging with the content of this text, you will put into practice those things that will improve learning, instruction, grading, assessment, and the culture of your classroom for your learners. It is my hope that you will come to see your instructional content, the literature, the texts, and the tests you put in front of your learners as they do: as either connecting to their own lived experiences or building walls—marginalizing them even further. And that when the latter is the case, you eliminate that which is harmful.

It is my hope that you will see that equitable practices can literally change lives.

About This Professional Learning Book

I've written this book with learner engagement in mind. Your engagement as a learner, and the engagement of the learners you serve every day in your schools and classrooms. So, if you haven't already done so, prepare a journal for your journey through this text. The questions I ask throughout are not mere hypotheticals. Think, reflect, journal, and act on them. The text is interactive. You'll want to mark up your book, take notes, and have a place for completing the many activities you find in each chapter, because you will be prompted to research, examine, plan, and implement.

Where possible, I provide you with examples of what things should (or might) look like in the classroom, along with nonexamples—what things should never look like in the classroom. These examples and nonexamples are not all-encompassing. I cannot imagine every context of every reader of this book. What I have done is drawn upon my more than 20 years of working with schools and districts across North America, coaching in classrooms, and providing professional learning to nearly one thousand school

districts. From that experience, that learning, I have a warehouse of examples. Your context may be slightly different, but hopefully, the examples will be a sufficient guide.

Chapter 1 is where we establish a simple definition of equity. It's one that's easy to memorize and apply across contexts. Here you'll also learn the four equity indicators and learn to evaluate four areas common to all schools and districts. And I'll give you exemplars: what each looks like and what each should never look like.

In **Chapter 2** we turn our focus inward to consider our individual identities and then outward to understand systemic bias and racism.

In **Chapter 3** we develop a baseline of inclusivity, identifying who our learners are and how we can begin to develop cultural competency to support them in our schools and classrooms.

In **Chapter 4** we look at the foundations of creating a culture in your classroom or school that is safe and inclusive of all learners.

In **Chapter 5** we begin evaluating instructional practices based on Equity Indicator 2: Standards. We focus on what is necessary to recognize and how to respond to the learning needs of culturally and linguistically diverse learners.

In **Chapter 6** we turn our attention to instructional content, examining the materials we use based on Equity Indicator 3: Impartiality. We look for representation and consider how bias, stereotype, and misrepresentation find their way into our content and impact our learners.

In **Chapter 7** you'll also learn how and why to develop media literacy along with strategies for supplementing and enhancing existing instructional materials to make what you have work until the next curriculum adoption.

In **Chapter 8** the foundations of equitable assessment are laid. Then, in **Chapter 9**, we explore principles and strategies for creating equitable assessments and implementing equitable assessment practices through a culturally relevant lens. Specific strategies are laid out in grade-level bands to help you implement strategies most appropriate to your assigned grade level.

Similarly, in **Chapter 10** the foundations of equitable grading are laid. **Chapter 11** provides you with grade-range specific strategies for communicating grading policies and practices with parents and caregivers, and **Chapter 12** provides you with a guide to implementing an equitable grading system in your classroom.

Chapter 13 is an opportunity to reflect on the work you've done through the course of the text. You'll use the lens of the four equity

indicators as your metric and think about your journey on the Pathway to Cultural Competence.

Finally, you'll find several appendices with additional exemplars, tools, and background information to supplement your learning.

Extending Your Learning

In several chapters, you'll find a section titled *The Work of the Professional Learning Community* with specific activities that are best supported by a community of educators. If you have not already done so, now is the time to create a PLC to work through the content of this text. There will be many times you'll want someone to navigate the topics along with you. Your PLC is also always the best venue for discussing the *Reflect and Act* activities and the *Mindset Meter* self-assessments at the end of every chapter, as well as more involved activities in Chapters 12 and 13.

Your collective experiences and collective intelligence will provide a deeper understanding, and perhaps greater exposure to the inequities that may be at work in your organization.

If you are not reading this book as part of a community of educators, but rather on your own, you may want to create your own community.

Of course, I'm always curious to hear what is happening in schools and classrooms. Feel free to email info@askdrberry.com with your questions and anecdotes.

I am not a *teacher*, but rather an *educator.* I hope, as you read and work through this text, that you are both a learner and an educator, too. Enjoy!

CHAPTER 1

EDUCATIONAL EQUITY IN THE K–12 CLASSROOM

The Simple Definition of Equity

Have you ever wondered, when you sit in the quiet of your own thinking and reflecting space, "Am I really doing what is equitable? Am I providing instruction or leading or speaking with an equity mindset? Am I looking through the lens of equity? And how do I know?"

If you've ever had that thought, you're not alone! I've had it. So, what is **equity**? Many of us struggle to define it. We think we know it when we see it, but cannot explain it succinctly to those outside of our world of education. It is a term that is used daily. We say that we want equitable education, but for whom? How do we get it? What needs to change? How do we know when we've achieved it?

To truly get at equity, we must first agree that each child is an individual.

I am a Black American. My parents escaped the Jim Crow South in the 1950s, settling in California. Education was important to them, as was making sure our speech had no vestiges of Black Vernacular or a Southern accent. My English was flawless. My grammar impeccable. But I was a child steeply rooted in the culture of Black America. My father was a Black Panther and practicing Muslim. My home culture did not reflect the White European-American middle class "norm" upon which U.S. schools and curriculum were built. My parents were emigrants, yet multi-generational racialized Americans. The disconnect between my own lived experience and the instructional materials—remember

Dick and Jane?—was more a chasm than a gap. Were it not for an amazing third-grade teacher, Mrs. Gowdy, I'm not sure where I would have landed. I know I was not alone.

The diversity of lived experiences of our learners is vast. I cannot list them all, nor can we imagine that we know or understand them all. When the culture of home is distinctly different from that of school, the learner is culturally diverse—whether you can *see* their culture or not.

We have identified and unidentified exceptional learners such as hearing, visually, verbally, or physically impaired, and neurodivergent.

And we have learners who are multiply diverse. Perhaps both culturally and linguistically or linguistically and neurologically, or some other combination.

There are no cookie-cutter kids, so there can be no simple cookie-cutter solutions to equitable access. What's an educator to do?

Well, let's start with a simple definition of equity. The National Equity Project (n.d., para. 1) defines it as "each child receives what they need to develop to their full academic and social potential." I define equity simply and broadly as *without bias against or favoritism for.* When talking about our thoughts, mindsets, and actions as educators being rooted in equity, we must provide an educational experience for each child without bias against any child based on their language or culture or ability or neurodivergence . . . or gender or race.

How do you define equity? Take a minute to reflect and write your own definition in your journal.

equity—without bias against or favoritism for

The Four Equity Indicators

To grade ourselves on educating through a lens of equity, we must have a consistent form of measurement—a metric. How can we quantify, or count, or measure equity? How can we measure bias or favoritism through a scientific, **quantifiable** lens?

quantifiable—anything that can be measured or counted using numbers, e.g., Lexile levels, test scores, number of books read.

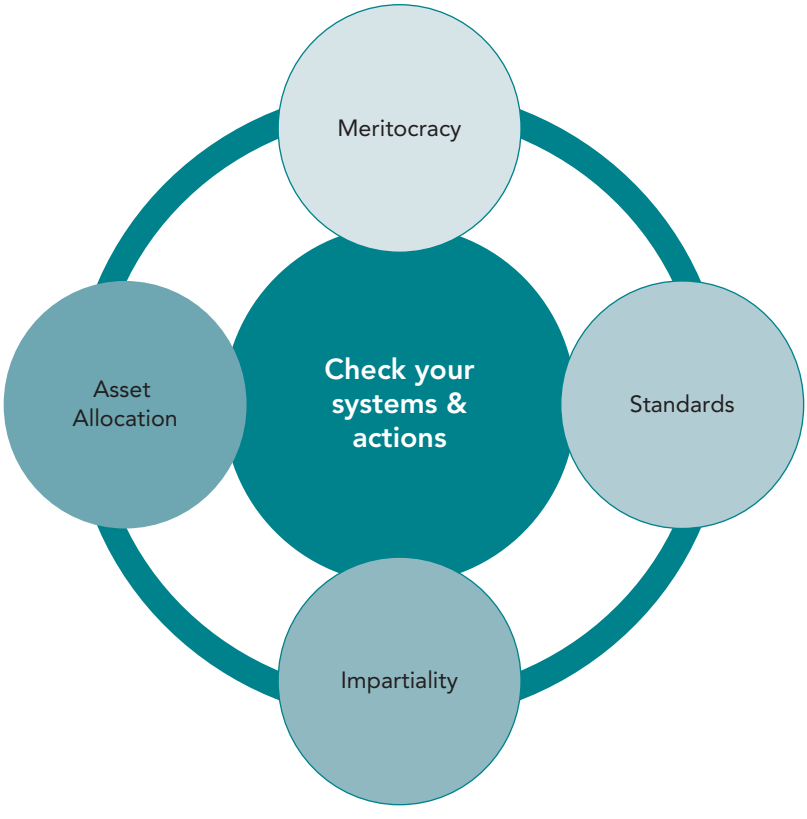
Let's look at four indicators of equity (Figure 1.1) and how we can use those to measure whether our curriculum materials, instructional practices, disciplinary actions, policies, procedures, and pretty much everything else in our educational systems are truly equitable—showing no bias against or favoritism for any learner or their lived experience.

We'll rely on these four indicators of equity:

1. Meritocracy
2. Standards
3. Impartiality
4. Asset allocation

Figure 1.1

The Four Equity Indicators



I chose these four indicators after conducting research on achievement indicators and educational equality in other developed and developing nations. UNESCO examined the condition of education through a global lens, viewing quality education as a "fundamental human right." For each of these indicators, an essential question will guide your examination as we check our classroom culture and instructional materials and practices. Each indicator is a source of data, an opportunity to check your outcomes against an ideal. The data informs us of how we are doing: we as educators and our students as learners and future global citizens.

MERITOCRACY

Meritocracy is the idea that power is held by people based on their ability. There are two essential questions to ask here:

- *Who has the power in your classroom?*
- *Are we using that power for the good of the marginalized in our school community?*

In a truly equitable system, those holding the power should be those who have the ability, the desire, and the commitment to use that power for good; for the good of the marginalized, without bias against those who may not be marginalized. We'll get more into this concept in Chapter 4 so don't worry if it feels hazy.

STANDARDS

We typically think of standards as "the knowledge or skills that every student should learn and be able to do at each grade level" (Institute for Educational Sciences, n.d., p. 1). Consider that and think more broadly: who enrolls, who attends, who achieves literacy and numeracy on time?

Think also about the standards of educators—our professional standards and the Educators' Oath in the Practitioner's Perspective box on page 13. We must consider not only the academic targets of the learners, but our adherence to standards that target our skills in crafting and delivering instruction so that every learner can demonstrate mastery. There are two essential questions to ask here:

- *Who is demonstrating mastery?*
- *Are we taking action that results in demonstrating ongoing mastery year over year?*

In a truly equitable system, the standards are not the high bar that only some (children and educators) will reach, but the minimum

proficiency for each person. That means that the instruction we provide and how we provide it is determined by what is required for each child to meet that minimum level of proficiency. When we reflect upon our daily work, we ask the two questions above to shape the next day's work serving our learners.

Examine your own state's professional standards for teaching. In which standards are you demonstrating mastery? In which are you not? What actions could you take to demonstrate mastery year over year?

Practitioner's Perspective

Doctors take the Hippocratic Oath. What if educators also had to take an oath to teach? What would that oath look like? Perhaps something like this:

"I will apply pedagogic measures for the benefit of all children according to my ability and judgment; I will keep them from illiteracy and innumeracy. I will neither use an inappropriate method, nor will I make a suggestion to this effect. I will not teach to a test. I will teach for the benefit of children, remaining free of all intentional injustice, of all mischief, and in particular, of low expectations for children who come to learn" (Berry, 2023, p. 40).

IMPARTIALITY

Impartiality is another way of saying "fairness," or "without bias," but in this instance, it is more specific. The two essential questions we ask here are:

- *Who has representation?*
- *Am I accurately and appropriately considering the cultures of all those affected, or am I acting from a middle-class, White European, Western cultural bias?*

In a truly equitable classroom, every policy, practice, and curriculum instrument must be examined to ensure that you are not harming children by subliminally providing instruction that the children, their lived experiences, their races, their cultures, their people, and their languages are not the norm. For example, minor microaggressive statements such as, "Huh, that's different" in response to a learner's expressed thought or dress, or banning peer support or collaboration because it's viewed as cheating, puts the learners' cultures at odds with yours. Not recognizing all cultural holidays on the class calendar, or questioning why certain learners do not want to dress up for Halloween is partial. Oppression

occurs in many forms, and omission is one of them. We often use the metaphor of "mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors" when discussing the importance of representation and diversity in literature. We'll go deeper into that in Chapter 3.

Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors

Using the metaphors of *mirrors, windows,* and *sliding glass doors* to describe literature is rooted in the work of children's literature scholar Rudine Sims Bishop (2012). When examining literature for diversity of representation, it's about how learners see not only themselves, but others in books.

Mirrors are books where learners see themselves, their cultures, their languages, their lived experiences. Sometimes the characters physically look like them or members of their families. Sometimes the characters come from similar cultural or linguistic backgrounds. Or it could be that they share common lived experiences, even common traumas. The big idea is that learners see themselves reflected in the literature.

Windows are books that provide learners views into the cultures and lived experiences of people who are different from them. Windows give learners diverse perspectives. Here they learn to empathize with people who may not look like them or share common culture but may share lived experiences or thinking. The big idea here is that learners see other cultures and develop multicultural awareness.

Sliding glass doors extends the window metaphor. Learners not only "see" other cultures but are provided an opportunity to "step into" the lived experiences of diverse peoples, even if only for a moment. Learners enjoy an immersion into the lives and worlds of people and cultures they may never otherwise experience. The big idea here is that learners deeply experience other cultures, further developing empathy and multicultural awareness.

ASSET ALLOCATION

Asset allocation is about creating constructive inequality to remedy the historical oppression of marginalized learners. The essential questions here are:

- *Is there positive structural inequality?*
- *Am I choosing and allocating resources to create opportunity and excellence for all involved?*

In a truly equitable classroom, you work to remedy or eliminate gaps and disproportionality. This means that assets or resources (like time and small group instruction) are committed in a targeted way to provide what is needed for those who need more, all the

while ensuring that you do no harm to any other learners. When you allocate classroom assets equitably, you do your part to eliminate disproportionalities in areas such as referrals to special education or suspensions and expulsions from your classroom.

The Four Equity Indicators at Work

To see how we can examine our schools and classrooms through the lenses of the four equity indicators, we'll use two areas common to every K–12 system: foundational skills and discipline. Why these two? Simple. Everyone involved in the day-to-day operations of school has some connection to both. You either provide or are impacted by them. And every learner encounters and is impacted by both at some point in their educational journey.

FOUNDATIONAL SKILLS

Meritocracy

I've yet to meet an educator that doesn't state they want all their learners to read, write, think, and calculate with mastery at grade level. After all, it becomes more difficult to provide content instruction to older learners who lack basic skills. They tend to have more disciplinary issues. Their futures as productive citizens are not nearly as promising as those of learners who are higher achievers.

But do we always do what is in the best interest of our learners? Are children who are racially, culturally, or linguistically diverse equally successful in foundational skills in reading and mathematics when it comes time for state testing? Are there achievement gaps fueled by a **provision gap**?

> **provision gap**—the difference between demonstrated academic ability as measured by high-stakes assessments, often annual state testing, and the required benchmarks of a grade level; the gap that is created by the use of ineffective instructional methods and culturally inappropriate curriculum

When we look at test score data, which groups tend to have the largest gaps? These are the learners we are marginalizing when we do not use our power for good.

Standards

Mastery of foundational literacy skills means the learner can read grade level material with **automaticity**, **prosody**, and high-level

comprehension without scaffolds or supports. We serve learners best when those responsible for determining the instructional methods and materials for each child, especially at kindergarten and Grade 1, ask the two essential questions over and over: *Who is demonstrating mastery? Are we taking action that results in demonstrating ongoing mastery year over year?* When we take it down to the level of *each* child, we move away from decision-making based on price or preference and toward data-based decision-making rooted in equity.

At the higher grade levels and across content areas, our learners rely on those foundational skills. And you rely on your learners having mastered those skills so that they can master the standards for your content area and grade level. As a community of educators in a system rooted in equity, we must hold one another accountable for making choices that result in equal outcomes. We must work with one another not only in our siloed departments and grade levels, but across them.

We make certain our choices, including providing professional learning for those who deliver instruction, are in the best interest of our learners. We make certain that our choices for children who are racially, culturally, or linguistically diverse result in their mastery of foundational skills. We make certain to not create achievement gaps fueled by provision gaps.

automaticity—the ability to read connected text without spending cognitive energy processing low-level details

prosody—the ability to read connected text orally with intonation and appropriate emotion in various contexts

Through the frame of standards, when we look at outcomes across the grades, we look again to see which groups tend to have not only large, but also enduring gaps. We identify the subject areas where these gaps present themselves. We analyze when these gaps appear. Which learners are we marginalizing by our inaction or refusal to respond to the needs of each child? What materials selection or methodological approaches need to be modified, strengthened, or abandoned?

Impartiality

An important indicator of impartiality is representation. You might be thinking it's easy to have representation when providing reading instruction. After all, it's all about literature, right? And you're right. Representation in literature is fairly easy, so let's focus on

mathematics. What does impartiality look like when providing foundational math instruction?

Keep in mind, it's more than just who learners see, it's also about the ways we teach. How do you engage your learners? Do you use tools that will spark curiosity and engagement from learners who are historically marginalized through teaching from a White, Western perspective? Is content presented in ways that *accurately and appropriately consider the cultures of all* the learners in your classroom?

The genetic roots of many Black learners in North and South America reach back to the Yoruba people of West Africa, generally from areas that are now Nigeria, Benin, and Togo. Their traditional divination practices, the Ifá divination system, uses a binary system based on a binary principle of 0s and 1s. If this sounds familiar, it is because it is quite similar to the one found in modern computer science.

Babalawos, Ifá diviners or priests, use either an instrument known as an Opele or palm nuts thrown on a tray to create binary patterns. Each pattern corresponds to an Odu, which is a combination of specific symbols. Each of the 16 basic Odus and 240 permutations is associated with a significant body of verses full of wisdom, advice, and references to historical and mythological events.

What may interest and engage Black learners in your classroom, and others as well, is that while the modern binary system is generally attributed to seventeenth-century German mathematician Gottfried Leibenz, the Ifá system has existed since the tenth century, and possibly even earlier.

In addition, the Ifá system is still practiced today, not only in Africa, but among the Yoruba diaspora communities around the world. And that diaspora is likely represented in your school or classroom, but the learners themselves may not even know they are a part of it.

Asset Allocation

If our goal is to have all learners read, write, think, and calculate with mastery at grade level, then we must allocate the necessary resources in a manner that ensures just that. This may mean using a different, more explicit and systematic curriculum. It may mean smaller class sizes. Perhaps it means more time in instruction. And in an equitable system we may need to create this structure of "positive inequality" while maintaining or improving the achievement of learners who are already at grade level.

Foundational skills are just that: the foundation. Without equity in foundational skills, we cannot achieve equality in other areas such as advanced placement coursework.

DISCIPLINE

Meritocracy

Every classroom has issues that arise out of disciplinary challenges. Research tends to support that learners who lack academic skills typically have more disciplinary actions taken against them. Unlike foundational skills that can be remediated so learners catch up, the actions taken against learners for disciplinary infractions often have life and death consequences in the near term.

For children of color and children with special needs, particularly behavior disorders, encounters with the justice system occur far too frequently. To alleviate this, school systems are turning to alternative policies, such as eliminating the use of force by school resource officers and instituting restorative practices to replace punitive actions.

Here we must ask if children who are racially or culturally diverse are disproportionately represented in punitive disciplinary actions in our schools. When we look at suspension, expulsion, and arrest data, which groups tend to be overrepresented in comparison to their percentage of the overall population? These are your disenfranchised learners. They are likely victims of bias and it may not be the children, but the adults who require intervention. Perhaps the classroom instruction that is being provided is not meeting the needs of the learners. Perhaps as educators we lack the cultural competence to connect with racially or culturally diverse learners. Perhaps we even fear some learners because of our lack of cultural connectedness.

Standards

You might wonder what standards have to do with discipline. Recall the definition of standards: "the knowledge or skills that every student should learn and be able to do at each grade level" (Institute for Educational Sciences, n.d., p. 1). We do not have state or national standards for behavior, however we do have expectations. We expect children to *know how* to behave. Those expectations are generally prescribed by community and cultural norms. But whose culture?

And in the absence of written behavior standards and high-stakes assessment of their mastery, we don't teach behavioral norms. We tend to simply expect adherence to norms that inevitably vary from classroom to classroom, year to year.

This has lifelong academic and social implications for our learners. Consider that the United States has the world's highest rate of incarceration (Prison Policy Initiative, 2021). Though it accounts for only 4.23% of the world's population overall, 25%

of the world's prison population is in the United States (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2022; United States Census Bureau, 2024). Mass incarceration is not simply a symptom of our learners' behaviors after leaving school. It is a systemic issue with its roots in how we teach or fail to teach behavior and how we discipline learners while they are in our classrooms.

In an equitable system, standards of behavior are taught. You can teach standards of behavior for your classroom. If the standard isn't met, you should strive to find ways to teach them without further harming any individual.

One of my behavioral pet peeves was the language learners used to address adults. Call me "old school" or a bit of a "Southern traditionalist," but where I come from, adults are addressed as "ma'am" or "sir." In my California classrooms, I made that expectation clear. It was an expectation for not only when they were in my classroom, but at any time on campus. And while some may find that a bit unrealistic, not only did my learners adhere to it, I received accolades for their exemplary behavior outside of my classroom. Other educators appreciated the carryover effect. After a while, my learners taught their peers and siblings to address adults in the same manner. And my learners were all Title I, all learners of color, attending school in what most would describe as "the worst neighborhood in town."

Impartiality

If comprehensive data was collected about who is disciplined in your classroom, what would it show? Think about who you discipline and what you discipline them for. Who is represented? Are **culturally and linguistically diverse learners (CLDLs)** more often disciplined? Is there even greater disproportionality for those learners who are Black, Latine, or Indigenous? Do your Black and Latine learners see themselves as discipline problems? More importantly, are your classroom disciplinary practices a mirror teaching them this?

> **culturally and linguistically diverse learner (CLDL)**—learners whose home culture is not mainstream, middle class, and White and/or whose language background reflects anything other than School English

Here, we adults need the sliding glass doors. We need to walk through them to experience the lives of our learners and develop greater empathy for their lived experiences. Then, we must examine our disciplinary practices to develop an equitable system.

In an equitable system, impartiality of discipline comes from working to develop cultural competence and becoming an antiracist educator. It comes as you work to establish restorative practices and eliminate encounters with the school- or community-based justice systems. We cannot change overrepresentation unless and until we change our systems and our mindsets. That change begins in your classroom and in your mind.

Asset Allocation

Think about your classroom discipline and any disproportionality there. If our goal is to reduce overall punitive disciplinary actions while at the same time eliminating disproportionality and encounters with the juvenile justice system, then we must allocate the necessary resources in a manner that does just that. Examine your curriculum and instruction for representation. Develop cultural competence and an antiracism mindset. Create a system of restorative practices in your classroom and eliminate retributive practices. (For more information on **restorative and retributive disciplinary practices**, see Appendix A.) In an equitable classroom we do these things by allocating resources where needed while maintaining the safety and security of your entire classroom community.

restorative practice—a conflict resolution approach focusing on repairing harm and rebuilding relationships emphasizing dialogue, accountability, and understanding the impact of one's actions, fostering community and trust among participants

retributive practice—an approach to discipline centered on punishment for wrongdoers, emphasizing the infliction of penalties proportionate to the offense; prioritizes deterrence and retribution

The good news is, by doing the work in this book, by studying and engaging in thoughtful reflection at each prompt, you will be well on your way!

Creating disciplinary equity is more about our behavior and actions as adults, rather than simply those of the learners. We must shift our mindsets, our behaviors, our beliefs (see Tables 1.1–1.4). Some of that shifting comes in the form of developing cultural competency. Some comes from professional learning and growth. Some from redesigning our systems. And while you may

not be able to change the system, what you model in your classroom just might be the shining exemplar that becomes a catalyst for systemic change.

Table 1.1

What Meritocracy Looks Like in Schools and Classrooms

EXEMPLARY CLASSROOMS LOOK LIKE THIS . . .	. . . NOT THIS
Foundational Skills	
At grades K–3, classroom instruction is clearly differentiated in ELA and math with learners who are below grade level receiving explicit, systematic instruction that meets their needs.	At grades K–3, classroom instruction in ELA and math is the same for all learners regardless of their current performance level.
Struggling learners receive instruction that accelerates their learning so they may close any gap within two years.	Struggling learners may not be identified, do not receive differentiated instruction, or the "differentiation" is remediation rather than acceleration. Instruction does not support closing gaps.
Achievement gaps either (a) do not exist between subgroups, or (b) are on a trajectory of closure within two years.	Achievement gaps exist between subgroups and are not on a trajectory of closure within two years.
Discipline	
Learners removed from class for behavior are not disproportionately of any one race, ethnicity, gender, or other identity group. Any behavior that receives punitive treatment is addressed equally and at all times, regardless of who commits the infraction.	Learners removed from class for behavior may disproportionately be of a particular race, ethnicity, gender, or other identity group. Behaviors that receive punitive treatment are not addressed equally. Favoritism is shown to particular racial, ethnic, gender, or other identified groups.

Table 1.2

What Standards Look Like in Schools and Classrooms

EXEMPLARY CLASSROOMS LOOK LIKE THIS . . .	. . . NOT THIS
Foundational Skills	
Elementary core curriculum is chosen based on a demonstrated scientific instructional methodology and implemented with a level of fidelity that ensures all learners demonstrate grade-level proficiency in literacy and numeracy skills at each grade level.	Core curriculum is chosen based on something other than science that backs the efficacy of the instructional methodology; and/or implementation lacks fidelity; and/or more than 5% of learners lack grade-level proficiency in literacy and numeracy skills at each grade level.
Discipline	
Standards of discipline are written.	No consistent standards exist for behavioral expectations in each grade level.
Behavioral norms are consistent from classroom to classroom and matriculate from grade to grade.	Each instructor uses their own norms and judgment to determine what is appropriate behavior.
Instruction in behavioral norms and social-emotional skills is provided as part of the regular course of instruction.	No instruction in social-emotional skills is provided.

Table 1.3

What Impartiality Looks Like in Schools and Classrooms

EXEMPLARY CLASSROOMS LOOK LIKE THIS . . .	. . . NOT THIS
Foundational Skills	
Curriculum provides mirrors, windows, and doors in both ELA and math, so that learners can connect to the content through a variety of perspectives representative of themselves and other culturally and linguistically diverse peoples.	Curriculum tends to be White Eurocentric in perspective. Little or no representation of culturally and linguistically diverse peoples, or their contributions to the content area are found.

EXEMPLARY CLASSROOMS LOOK LIKE THIS . . .	. . . NOT THIS
Discipline	
Racial, ethnic, gender, learning ability, or socioeconomic-status subgroup disproportionality does not exist in disciplinary data.	Racial, ethnic, gender, learning ability, or socioeconomic-status subgroup disproportionality exists in disciplinary data.
Classroom management supports a culture where all learners can see themselves as positive behavior models.	Poor classroom management results in a culture where CLDLs are more often seen as disciplinary problems.

Table 1.4

What Asset Allocation Looks Like in Schools and Classrooms

EXEMPLARY CLASSROOMS LOOK LIKE THIS . . .	. . . NOT THIS
Foundational Skills	
CLDLs and learners-of-promise receive explicit, systematic curriculum and targeted instruction that meets their needs, resulting in at- or above-grade level outcomes in all subjects.	Resources are not allocated in a manner that will effectively support the academic achievement of CLDLs and learners-of-promise.
Learners at- and above-grade level receive curriculum and instruction that meets their needs so that they continue acceleration at a pace commensurate with their abilities and enrichment in line with their interests.	Learners at- and above-grade level receive curriculum and instruction that results in disengagement due to slow pace or low-interest and that may result in under-performance.
Discipline	
Sincere and consistent efforts are made to intervene early using restorative practices in the classroom, particularly for learners who appear to struggle with compliance or exhibit behaviors which may be deemed disruptive or destructive.	No early intervention exists. Early warning signs are ignored or dismissed.
Teachers seek out mental health resources for all learners, particularly for learners who appear to struggle with compliance or exhibit behaviors which may be deemed disruptive or destructive.	No resources are available or sought out.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we've covered a simple definition of equity and the Four Equity Indicators of meritocracy, standards, impartiality, and asset allocation. We considered how those indicators present themselves in foundational skills and disciplinary actions. You'll revisit these indicators many times in this text. So, if it feels a bit murky still, not to worry. The content will spiral and scaffold. Spaced repetition is a proven strategy for reaching mastery.

In Chapter 2, you'll develop an understanding of implicit and explicit bias. We'll examine racism's four tiers, bias, and their roles in equitable instruction.

Reflect and Act

Reflect on any questions and notes you wrote while reading about the four equity indicators. Now examine your own classroom, school, or district—depending on the capacity in which you serve. In your journal, respond to these questions: Where do you see inequity? What do you think is the most egregious of those? Which do you think should be addressed first? Can you use the four equity indicators to begin the work? What additional learning or supports might you need?

Use the following mindset meter as a self-assessment. The mindset meter probes different levels of understanding. Use it to make connections between the chapter content and your beliefs and behaviors. Reflect. Think. Plan. Record your responses in your journal.

●●● MY MINDSET METER

Complete the mindset meter as a self-assessment of this chapter's content.

Knowledge: The purpose of equity in the classroom as I understand it from this chapter:

Comprehension: The four equity indicators as I understand them from this chapter:

Application: How I can use each of the equity indicators in my daily work:

Analysis: I can draw these conclusions about (in)equity based on what I learned in this chapter:

Synthesis: This is how I will begin or continue to work through the lens of equity:

Evaluation: I used to think . . . but now I think . . .

_____

_____

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_____

If you are completing this work as part of a book study or professional learning, you may find there are great variances in the way you and your peers respond. This is because your lived experiences and your cultures may be more diverse than you think.