

A Lens into Student Group Achievement



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“What are stars for?” Asked 12-year-old Jose Hernandez. His teacher, Mrs. Young replied: “You are going to be the kind of person who will have an answer to that question.” (*A Million Miles Away*).

Introduction

An elementary principal once told me, “Equity is the hardest concept for me to grasp; I am not sure how to translate it into the context of my work.” I appreciated his candid response and vulnerability. Equity is defined in myriad ways, and its conceptualization varies depending on the context in which it is situated. In our current K-12 context, a post-COVID-19 era, we have seen an increased polarization of ideas and *tribalism*¹ with little to no tolerance for diverse ideas, perspectives, and ways of being. This polarization attempts to distract educators and others in the field from the work of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI).

Hence, the importance of defining Educational Equity in the context of K-12 education provides clarity and direction for applying the equity lens in our day-to-day efforts. *Educational Equity*, as a working definition, *means acknowledging that all students can learn at high levels and distributing resources to provide equal opportunities based on the needs of each individual student*. The educational equity working definition is fundamentally rooted in the belief that every student is entitled to be treated with dignity to reach their fullest potential. Equally, all stakeholders bear the moral imperative to act in ways that foster learning environments where students can thrive academically, socially, and emotionally.

The equity lens is a tool for developing the ability to see and understand our context equitably. Applying an equity lens engages every educator in collaborative data inquiry processes to help create safe and positive learning conditions and opportunities for each student. Engaging in collaborative data inquiry processes as leadership teams to address problems of practice related to meeting the diverse needs of every student is the central idea of this paper.

Before operationalizing the equity lens in our daily work, we need to commit to a set of principles in which we can be grounded and continually renewed. The guiding principles of listening with empathy, collaborating, building and bridging across differences, persisting, and exercising good judgment and resiliency are a few dispositions necessary to frame our mindsets and actions when approaching our work equitably. Noguera & Noguera (2023) further explains what it means to approach our work equitably;

In education, equity has been defined as a commitment to serving all students, regardless of background or need, and a willingness to implement *differentiated* measures to address students' academic and social needs (Blankstein, Noguera, & Kelly, 2016).

Differentiation is critical because it provides a means to recognize and respond to the diverse needs of students. To differentiate for the various needs of each student, educators must be informed about who

¹ *Tribalism is the tendency of people to form groups based on shared identities, beliefs, and values.*

students are culturally and linguistically, what their interests are, what assets or funds of knowledge they bring with them (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005), their level of readiness, how they learn, and socialize.

Understanding, seeing, and hearing students for who they are in our schools will aid educators in designing and differentiating the learning content, process, product, affect, and environment in ways that meet students' diverse learning needs (Tomlinson, 2015). Although the equity lens/work is multilayered, this paper is only offering a starting point to the work by reflecting on our mindsets— are they *asset-based*² or *deficit-based*³ and by asking key questions for each of our four data elements, demographics, perception, learning, and process to gather evidence toward continuous improvement (Benrhardt, 2016).

Knowing and Doing the Equity Work

Knowing about Equity Work

I am situating equity as a verb, providing students full access to rigorous curricula with high levels of support informed by who they are and their diverse needs. Our work is student-centered, and thus, a starting point is to understand which students are benefiting from our district and schoolwide systems, which students are not currently benefiting, and how we know. Blankstein and Noguera, 2015 expand on equity work as follows:

The starting point for working toward the goal of excellence through equity is creating a community where the needs of each student are thoroughly known, and each member understands his or her role. By knowing our children—how they learn, what motivates them, what challenges they face, and so on—We are better able to create an environment in which all students can get what they need to succeed. We will also show that students can be part of this process, and spaces can be provided so that they can tell us what they need to be successful. No one, including children, should be expected to passively accept what others provide for them, even when presumably it is done in their interests. We want learning environments where students are investing in seeking out information, where they are willing participants and collaborators in their own education (p. 21.)

Understanding, seeing, and hearing students as co-creators of their learning and providing the support they need to succeed is at the core of equity work. However, that is only possible through an asset-based mindset based on a “can do” philosophy and seeing their contributions as gifts to the learning environment. We all benefit and become better because of the diverse backgrounds of our students.

Einstein is quoted as having said, “If I had an hour to solve a problem I'd spend 55 minutes thinking about the problem and five minutes thinking about solutions.” Therefore, the next section of doing the *equity* work focuses on asking key questions to help educators identify the problems of practice related to equity and problem-solve them in a way that ensures equal access and opportunity for every student.

² *Asset-based mindset is one that is grounded in what students can do or areas of strength.*

³ *Deficit-based mindset is one that is grounded on what students cannot do or areas of weaknesses.*

Doing the Equity Work

The starting point is asking the *right* questions. In this section, I offer a school improvement cycle process (Figure 1.) to guide our thinking and actions to become more equitable. The school improvement cycle through an equity lens is a process for leadership teams to engage in conversations “that advance the work on increasing equitable instruction, policies, practices, and outcomes” for every student (Roegman et al., 2020). Each step allows members of the schools' leadership teams to pause, delve deeper into the school's various data points, reflect, and think deeper about viable strategies to expand student access and opportunities. Next, and based on the work of Roegman et al. (2020), I explain each step of the process and provide associated examples and key questions.

School Improvement Cycle through an Equity Lens



Figure 1. School Improvement Cycle through an Equity Lens (adapted from Roegman et al., 2020).

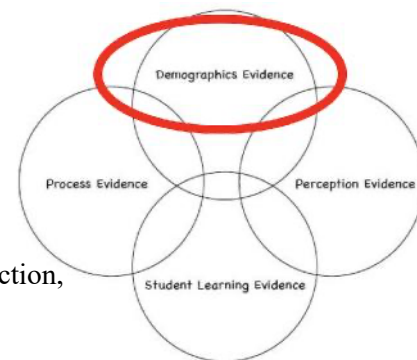
Name the equity focus

Leadership teams carve time to analyze multiple data points disaggregated by relevant demographic groups (socio-economic status, gender, race, disability, language proficiency, etc.). The equity focus may be based on an evidence-based priority around student groups. Equally, the equity focus may inform team-level goals as they establish goals with equity in mind for students in their stewardship. Applying the equity lens through this step is twofold: 1) develop an openness to analyze and interpret disaggregated data from multiple sources, and 2) prioritize the area of greatest need for eliminating barriers and expanding the provision of access and opportunities (evidence sources: demographic data, assessments, surveys, screeners, etc.).

Example: **School A** identified students underperforming in mathematics. After further analysis of the data, student groups such as multilingual learners and students with disabilities were 20-30% below their counterparts.

Questions:

- What does the current data tell us about representation among student groups?
- What are the barriers to more equitable outcomes?
- What factors within your school's sphere of influence may be contributing to your current results (consider curriculum, instruction, environmental, and learner/ student factors)?



Adapted from V. I. Bernhardt (2004). ACSA Leadership. Continuous Improvement: It Takes More Than Test Scores.

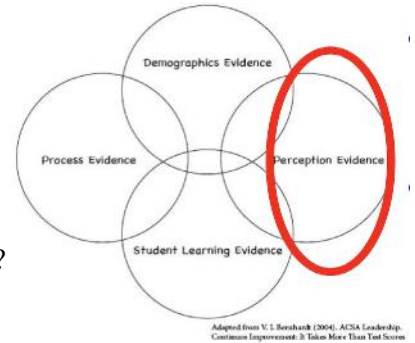
Identify the problem of practice

The problem of practice is an area that needs improvement based on evidence and refined through dialogue. The problem of practice becomes the focus of teaching and learning. It must be observable, actionable, connected to the broader school priority, and highly leveraged.

Example: School A Performance gaps in mathematics among multilingual learners and students with disabilities (evidence source: surveys, focus groups, interviews, etc.).

Questions:

- Does the problem focus on instructional practices? Is it observable?
- Is it within the school or district's control, and can it be improved?
- If acted on, will the problem significantly affect student learning?
- What should we be doing to close this 20-30% gap?



The problem of practice requires implementing high-leverage **strategies** targeting the expansion of access and opportunities for academic success. For more information regarding high-leverage strategies, visit: <https://cedar.education.ufl.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/HLPs-and-EBPs-A-Promising-Pair.pdf>.

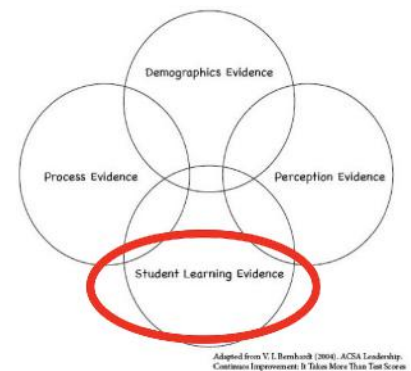
Gathering and analyzing evidence through an equity lens

As school leadership teams define strategies and actions, it is critical for them to think through which strategies or action steps will yield the highest impact on student learning and achievement, especially when targeting the diverse needs of multilingual learners and students with disabilities. Not all strategies are created to yield high impact on student achievement (the link above provides a good starting point in understanding what research has categorized as high-leverage in the education of students with diverse needs). It is equally important for leadership teams to identify the sources of data that will be collected related to the problem of practice (i.e. student achievement data, classroom observations, student work samples, discipline referral, climate surveys, etc.).

Example: Classroom observations demonstrated three areas for needed improvement: 1) increased time to work with multilingual learners and students with disabilities, 2) shift low expectations manifested by some teachers, and 3) differentiate high-leveraged pedagogical practices for mathematics instruction.

Questions:

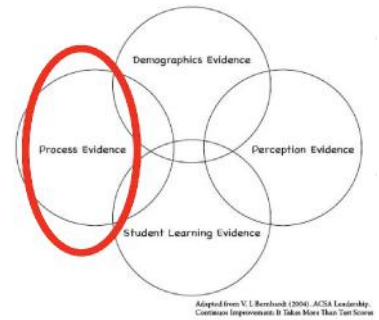
- What is the impact of the teacher's instruction?
- How are teachers teaching mathematics?
- What does the data analysis tell us about what teachers need to do to improve?
- What should we do differently for these student groups?
- What patterns do we see in how teachers interact with different students?
- What resources exist that could be leveraged to challenge these barriers?



Reflecting on the Equity Work

Reflecting on the equity work and adjusting practices accordingly requires several shifts:

- 1) from what students *can't do* to what students *can do* mindsets,
- 2) from making assumptions about students to asking questions and being curious about those students, and
- 3) from a “one size fits all” to differentiating based on the various needs of students.



These shifts are informed by the evidence schools gather and analyze from the continuous school improvement data sources of demographics, perception, student learning, and processes. As cited by Bernhardt (2016), W. Edwards Deming states: “Learning organizations ‘schools’ are perfectly designed to get the results they are getting now. If learning organizations ‘schools’ want different results, they must measure and then change their processes to get the results they really want” (p.43).

Questions:

- Is what we are doing making a difference? How do we know?
- How well does the school’s plan address the needs of each student?
- What is the evidence that the school’s plan is supporting each student to thrive?

Conclusion

Fast forward 30 years, Jose Hernandez, son of migrant workers, became an astronaut assigned to the Space Shuttle mission STS-128 crew. It took him 12 years to be accepted into the Space program at NASA. He did not give up on his dream to be an astronaut. On the contrary, he took each rejection as an opportunity to become a better and stronger candidate. As Jose Hernandez prepared to board the shuttle, his teacher, Mrs. Young visited him at the NASA Space Center and reminded him that she always believed in him and that dreams do come true. He became the person who could answer the question, “What are stars for”? Like Mrs. Young, we are in the business of helping students believe and achieve their dreams. We can only do that by knowing who our students are and meeting their academic, social, and emotional needs. There are endless students’ dreams ready to come true and endless doors of opportunities we can open for them. Let's get to work!

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