Culturally Responsive Education in the Classroom

This exciting book helps educators translate the concept of equity into the context of pedagogy in the K-12 classroom. Providing a practice-oriented framework for understanding what equity entails for both teachers and learners, this book clarifies the theoretical context for equity and shares rich teaching strategies across a range of content areas and age groups. Unpacking six themes to understand Culturally Responsive Education (CRE), this powerful book helps teachers incorporate equity into behaviors, environments, and meaningful learning opportunities. *Culturally Responsive Education in the Classroom* provides specific, practice-based examples to help readers develop a culturally responsive pedagogical mindset for closing equity gaps in student achievement.

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Culturally Responsive Education in the Classroom

An Equity Framework for Pedagogy

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Shout out to all the brilliant teachers whom I've learned so much from over the years. Thank you! Thank you! Thank you!
And shout out to Hip Hop too… yes, definitely Hip Hop. None of this is possible without Hip Hop.

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Preface

I'm often struck by the vibrancy even before I can determine the topic of instruction. It pulls you in – like gravity – but with personal and intentional purpose. The momentum is palpable. And though it is often the teacher leading the learning, one is able to see empowerment in the students' faces. I'm always captivated in these spaces. *They take me back to the same memory…*

It was a little theater just outside of Washington, DC, and I had come to town just to see her perform. I'd been a big-time Erykah Badu fan since her freshman album, but I'd never seen her give a live show. The venue was standing room only, and we were packed in – and yet, once the set started, I felt like Erykah was directing every syllable of sound, every sway of movement… to me. It may or may not have been my imagination that we made eye contact many times among the hundreds of other fans singing along and basking in the soul-filling rhythms that flowed from the stage. We were transfixed in her presence, but the show wasn't hers alone. The audience was anything but passive participants. In fact, we sang along and responded as she called out to us. By the end of the set, we were all equal stakeholders in an experience that had in some way changed everyone in the crowd – but I left the Filmore Theater that night certain that Erykah had developed the

absolute entirety of that experience specifically for me… *and then I am eventually transported back to the classroom.*

Though the analogy may be imperfect (as are all analogies), it has become one of my favorite illustrations of what it is I envision when I describe the work of brilliant teachers. Like Badu, they draw you into an experience – and they make their audience feel as if it is designed uniquely for them. Just as with the brilliant Erykah Badu, the same is true of brilliant teachers. Their light doesn't just illuminate their own stage. It invigorates. It saturates those in assembly in such a way that they are absorbed in the brilliance themselves.

The classrooms in which these teachers operate never quite look the same, but I've learned a lot from soaking up the energy in these spaces. I will tell you straightaway that there is no simple algorithm for creating the dynamic – but one knows it when one sees it. In this way it's a lot like being in love… Love is a word that is often activated in my inner dialogue when in the presence of such brilliance. These teachers operationalize love in ways that cannot be quantified – try as we might. No external confirmation is required. Nothing is wasted. Even the most subtle of moves has purpose. (The meaningfulness of it all inspires me!) Their words detail pictures that come to life in the most profound ways. Ideas as old as civilization are re-constructed such that every kiddo has equal authorship and access to them.

I'm amazed at the prolific incarnations of understandings when a brilliant teacher is in that flow. It feels like watching Leonardo da Vinci paint the *Mona Lisa* or Marvin Gaye record *What's Going On?* It's immediately clear that something transformative is happening – and all I wish for is that the moment will last forever. I'm most enthralled by the creative choices of this brilliance that connect even the quietest (or loudest) or timid (or confident) or questioning (or certain) of students. The brilliance draws them all in like a supernova does every bit of matter in its orbit – but never, never have I seen it done exactly the same way by any two teachers. One recognizes the brilliance even as it surprises with its twists on traditional models. It feels like magic except the learning in these moments is inspirited by its relevance and realness. There is no trickery. It's authentic. It's present… and it leaves the students changed forever.

I experience something in these spaces that makes me feel hopeful and powerful. I have spent much of my career trying to unpack those moments, trying to better understand what's happening. What exactly is working for students? And just as importantly: What does the execution of that energy require of the teacher?

What Is This Book About?

This is a book about Equity – and specifically what Equity looks like (and feels like) in the context of pedagogy. Though the term "Equity" is currently a buzzword in many lecture halls and think pieces, I find that often teachers yearn for practical guidelines for its implementation; and it is, in my view, teachers who *most* need to understand the concept and its potential for application. While I have seen many elegant research studies that help to define how poorly Equity is realized in American education, a substantive understanding and interpretation of the concept is required at the classroom level. It is in classrooms where the most essential pedagogical transaction occurs – that being the social and intellectual exchanges between teacher and student.

In my work with educators, I have been trying to deepen my own understandings of what Equity is and how to build on its principles in order to improve the capacity of schools to serve the needs of the most vulnerable students. In this book, I am hoping to tell the story of my own understandings, even as they continue to emerge, about how individual schools and school systems can deliver on the original two-fold promise of American public education: (1) to sort among the various ethnic groups and social classes so as to identify and fairly position the talent of the youth to contribute to what was then a fledgling society; and (2) to prepare the youth to be responsible stewards of the American democracy. These original purposes of public schools – sullied by prejudices though they may be – have everything to do with how I conceptualize the idea of Equity as both a goal and process for thinking about the nature and design of educational opportunity. The effectual purpose of American education has largely been, however, to reinforce existing advantages and mute the voices and value of those already socially, politically, and economically marginalized. If we are to

evolve as an institution worthy of the public trust, the most righteous promises of America's public schools must be re-centered as the primary foci and guiding forces for policy and practice.

In that vein, I want this book to do three things:

- First, I want to define what it is I mean by Culturally Responsive Education (CRE) – which is, in my view, a framework that is useful for closing Equity gaps in school achievement outcomes. I argue that CRE is the embodiment and the pedagogical action arm of Equity work.
- Second, I want to flesh out the intersections of Equity and pedagogy to make the argument that – at least in the context of teaching and learning, which is the central task of schools – it is insufficient to discuss one in the absence of the other.
- Last, I want to give specific practice-based examples of learning experiences that reflect what I mean by CRE to further describe and explore the essential elements of the lessons not merely so that they might be replicated, but more importantly so that teachers may effectively leverage a CRE mindset in the design of learning experiences that meet the needs of their own students.

How Is This Book Organized?

There are six chapters in this book, each following a consistent format and each advancing an aspect of what, taken together, I have come to understand as an actionable approach to CRE. Chapter 1 broadly defines Equity as a theory regarding fairness in opportunity. The premises of this book all hinge on the notion that Equity is a construct that requires that we measure fairness not merely by inputs but rather by performance, achievement, and opportunity outputs. Chapters 2 and 3 define CRE as a mental model for addressing Equity gaps and present six themes of CRE that I have found to be useful language and reference points for ensuring that the work of Equity is carried out with integrity. Chapter 4 is devoted to planning. It presents five questions that I use in the design of culturally responsive learning experiences. These questions guide the choices we teachers make in our practice that reflect our beliefs and sense of purpose. Chapter 5

builds on the classroom scenarios presented throughout the book with a description of how ten specific strategies can be employed to draw out the CRE themes; and in Chapter 6, I offer observations and summarizing thoughts about the implications going forward for policies and practices in support of more equitable learning opportunities in education.

Each of Chapters 1 through 5 begins with the story of a learning experience that illustrates the chapter's overall concept. The stories are mostly from the intermediate–elementary grades, but they range from pre-K to high school. The stories, meant to bring you into classrooms to experience how the learning opportunities are presented to kiddos, keep us focused on the true purpose for our work while providing a canvas for the topics of the chapter. The sections that follow give a description and analysis of the chapter's primary subject with a discussion of the context and mindset necessary for framing the big ideas in our teaching. Each chapter concludes with concrete ideas for how to operationalize the conceptual knowledge into classroom practices along with key points that are important to remember in doing so.

A Note to the Reader

I have had, at various points in my career, great reservations about presenting strategies without the careful effort to give them context so that they can be understood as part of a larger cohesive effort. My hesitation has been rooted in my desire to avoid contributing to any misconceptions that Equity can be achieved through some simple checklist of sorts. To this day, I am wary of those who ask for strategies without the apparent willingness to examine how their own beliefs and attitudes may undermine the effective delivery of culturally responsive instruction; but I also know that many teachers learn by doing, and that there are multiple access points into the ongoing work of improving the opportunities for all students. My caution to you the reader is to not short-shrift the effort to build the consciousness required to be a culturally responsive educator. I encourage you to think of this book as more than just a collection of strategies. This book should be used to highlight what it is about some strategies that, when leveraged with Equity in mind, are useful for creating more

engaging, student-centered, rigorous learning experiences that honor your students' identities. Of all the brilliant teachers I've ever known, none were ever made effective through the use of any strategy alone; brilliant teachers have, however, always been able to skillfully use strategies in ways that are effective.

In writing this book, I am not looking to prove anything per se – nor am I endeavoring to refute anyone else. I sincerely hope to not be attached to the criticisms of the reader. Rather, I am seeking to share a paradigm about teaching and learning that has been enormously helpful to me and many persons with whom I have thought-partnered. But, in being completely forthcoming, I do have an agenda in writing this book. *I want to inspire you to do something that is really hard.* Sometimes in my presentations, particularly in more privileged spaces with predominantly White audiences, I'll perceive hostility; but frequently, I encounter a willingness to consider new ideas. In fact, when I ask people their intentions for the day, many will say something to the effect of "I'm here to keep an open mind." Sometimes that's code for, "I resent having to listen to you," but other times it is more or less a statement of truth. I've had many of those same persons come to me after the session and say something like: "You're right. This is just good for all kids…" So I ask you to have an open mind. If the text moves you, allow yourself to be moved.

Here's another thing you should know about me: I love ideas. One of the reasons I love books is because good books have good ideas in them. So when I cite scholarly literature in this book, I am not seeking to be comprehensive in my review. Rather, I'm seeking to share some of my favorite ideas and string them together into a larger narrative.

Finally, if you've ever heard me present, you probably know that I am an admirer of the artistic genius of Picasso. Picasso was a brilliant creative and also a desperately flawed person. Picasso's human failings give me a certain hope because if he could be brilliant, as imperfect as he was, then that means I can be brilliant too… and if we're being real about it, I suspect you aren't perfect either. (And by "I suspect," I mean, I know full well this to be true.) I composed a lot of this book in June and July of 2018 while travelling in Spain. After studying *Guernica* and other magnificent Picassos in person, I'm left to believe that it is possible to make a masterpiece. It is possible to be brilliant. That

possibility is an essential premise to my arguments relative to Equity and CRE.

It's a remarkable thing to see how artists respond to the viewing of a Picasso masterpiece. Some are inspired, but others seem to feel something more like intimidation. They see Picasso's mastery of lines and shapes, for example, as something of an indictment against their own artistic powers. I've seen similar reactions by teachers to models of brilliant pedagogy, as well. But we are wise to remember that brilliance does not have a single expression. Brilliance is a diverse population of strategies, styles, and techniques that vary from one situation to the next. I've seen brilliance many times in the practice of teachers. It looks different in every occasion, but I know it to be brilliance all the same. The question you should be considering as you read this book is, *What kind of brilliant are you?*

We begin by defining Equity; or more specifically, we begin by defining the work of Equity.

1

Equity Work Defined

Equity, as an education concept, is the implementation of an Equity mindset into thoughtful pedagogical design. Equity work is the sum total of the instructional and policy-developing tasks of operationalizing the values of Equity in real-time school contexts. It is, in my view, unwise to try to define Equity outside of the consideration of what the notion of Equity requires of us in terms of pedagogy. To define one minus attention to the other is problematic. Whenever we talk about Equity, we should be invoking actions, and those actions should evoke further insights – insights that support reflection, which, in turn, leads to further action.

Method Acting

Ms. Allen's fourth-grade classroom had become one of my favorite places to hang out whenever I had a little free time; and over the school year, I had developed my own relationships with her students through several co-teaching experiences. Ms. Allen and I both invest a great deal of time and energy into thinking about how we teach writing especially. We both believe that writing is one of the most powerful exercises in literacy for our students because they own such rich stories and have so much to say. The thing about fourth graders, though, is that they often have a hard time grasping the concept of revision. Revision to many fourth graders means the correcting of any mistakes specifically pointed out by the teacher; and elaboration

means begrudgingly adding one or maybe two sentences at the very end of the essay. (Frequently when they submit their revision, it's with a *What do you want from me?* sort of shrug as in: *I revised… just like you asked. Now leave me alone.*)

Our problem of practice centered the question of how we can better teach our kiddos the notion of revision as a commitment to deconstruct and reconstruct their writing. We specifically wanted them to give attention to the various ways in which they could improve their clarity and also better present the tone and voice most befitting of the piece. Our idea was to have the students plan and compose a first draft of a personal narrative in the study of a specific historical event from the perspective of people whose voices are often marginalized or altogether ignored. After the first drafts were written, we instructed the students to treat their pieces like scripts and act them out – while recording themselves – so that they could observe (with the support of their peers) any disconnects between what they wrote and what they saw on the screen. In the words of Ms. Allen:

> The purpose of them being able to do that activity is for them to be able to ask, 'Is my writing conveying the message that I want my reader to see as they are reading it?' We really wanted our students as authors to be able to convey their message to their readers. We need to be able to act out the scenes, and the scenes need to be set in a way that the reader will be able to visualize what we are saying.

But in order for this to work, our students had to give dynamic and authentic screen performances of their writing or we knew they wouldn't see what could be revised. In fact, it might be more accurate to say that we wanted them to *feel* what could be revised. We needed for them to feel any difference between an authentic performance and a written piece – specifically in terms of detail, dialogue, and elaboration. If the students were shy in their performance, they might not see the possibilities for revision. The performance was key…

So we introduced the students (through YouTube) to two famous experts on the subject of acting, Lee Strasberg and Stella Adler. These esteemed acting teachers rather grumpily modeled for our students three key concepts for actors that also translate to writing: histrionics, imagination, and concentration. We needed our students to

understand and apply all three into their performances so that they would best be able to discern how to revise their first draft of writing with the inspiration and direction of their own acting.

In order to get the best possible performances, we practiced several method-acting exercises. First, we drank a breakfast beverage from an imagined cup. We practiced exploring the sensory aspects of holding the cup in our hands. What does it feel like? Is it heavy? Or light? What color is it? What does it smell like? And eventually, What does it taste like? Then we fixed our hair in front of an imagined mirror making sure to get it just the way we like it. Finally, we put on our imagined socks and shoes practicing concentration and sustained attention to the task, until… a foul imagined stench consumed the room causing us to perform our stomach-churning disgust. After more than a few giggles and a few pertinent yet silly questions (e.g. "Should we pretend like someone farted?"), our students were ready to go off and act out their first drafts of the personal narratives.

Almost immediately, our students saw there were palpable differences between the texts. Said one of our kiddos, "When I'm acting, it brings out more energy than writing. So when I'm usually writing, I mostly get all the stuff that I planned about in my writing. But when I'm actually acting it out, it gets more detailed in my writing." As they experienced the gaps, they began to ask, "Can I re-write my draft? I need to elaborate more, and I need more dialogue." After revising their first drafts, we had the students record their scenes again; but this time, they shared their videos with peers. To raise the rigor further, we had each kiddo act out their own in addition to another student's writing, as well. They got to see how others interpreted their writing. If their interpretations were close, bravo! If some things were still not quite right, they knew more clearly what could be revised and how.

The students were then able to give each other feedback as they discussed strategies for making their writing better reflect the richness and energy of their acting. By the end of the unit, our students were analyzing the weaknesses of their own writing, and they were identifying their opportunities to improve what they had composed so as to more accurately capture their intent. A key to teaching revision, we learned, is to create experiences that allow the students to analyze and evaluate their own texts rather than having us evaluate on their

behalf – because when they evaluate themselves, it's more likely to be understood as a personal opportunity to find the words and devices of language that best express their intended meaning with their voice. That was how we taught our kiddos tools for writing personal narratives; they learned those tools as part of a larger purpose of creating pieces that are valid expressions of their meaning. The difference is significant. By emphasizing the purpose over the tools, through a writing experience, our students *felt* like writers.

Equity as a Performative Construct

Beyond contemplating the scope and impact of Equity (or inequity) in any conceptual or statistical sense, we must get to the point where the word Equity is understood as a performative construct; and by that I mean, any utterance of the term – if the meaning is to be believed and understood – is aligned with an expression of its idea so that the utterance becomes a demonstration in and of itself.

A bit grandiose? Semantics? Maybe, but I'm offering no apologies. Let's think about it this way…

Language is a system of symbols (words and phrases) that represent ideas. Performative is a word that means the extent to which the utterance of the word (or phrase) is itself both an expression and demonstration of the idea.

It's like saying, "I love you." The language is both an expression of an idea and also a demonstration of it. Further, the way we understand the phrase, "I love you" is contextualized by behaviors. We are more or less inclined to believe we are loved by someone who has uttered the words given the corresponding behavioral evidence. Another example is the phrase, "I'm sorry," which just like "I love you" is both the expression and demonstration of an idea. In fact, we get frustrated with the people who say "I'm sorry" to us but then go and repeat the offending act. Their behavior is an outright contradiction to the words they've spoken because "I'm sorry" is nice to hear when appropriate but it can be downright infuriating when it isn't performed with a demonstration that confirms the words. The concepts of "love" and "apology" have little practical use if they aren't understood in the performative sense.

Equity, if only deliberated in conceptual terms, will be limited in its impact on policies and practices. Equity in education is a construct best understood by its performative meaning. Where "love" and "apology" are words that define affective concepts, Equity is a word that expresses a belief. The word Equity embodies the belief that we will see achievement in all student groups when all students receive opportunities that they are able to perceive as meaningful and that allow them to draw on their social and cultural literacies in order to be academically successful. Both in terms of systems and individual educators, the evidence of the beliefs about Equity should show up in practice. To speak of Equity without corresponding evidence that demonstrates how the belief lives in one's work is either an incomplete or a contradicting statement. It shouldn't be possible to claim an Equity mindset without such supporting behavioral references. Equity is an idea that is demonstrated in our work.

Beliefs

If Equity work is the performance of beliefs about Equity, then any credible discussion on Equity must center beliefs, not teaching techniques, or curriculum, or even education policy. And yet, this discussion that centers beliefs is also about all of those things because it is the beliefs about Equity that are performed through the choices we make relative to teaching techniques, curriculum, and education policy.

But really though? Why beliefs? Isn't it more practical to pen an education book specifically about strategies for teaching "at-risk" student populations? Isn't a focus on beliefs just ideological grandstanding?

No. I believe that the concept of Culturally Responsive Education (CRE) provides a template for a body of work more than a menu of isolated actions. CRE is a framework for how we define excellent pedagogy – with particular attention to gaps in performance and achievement between sub-groups. (We'll discuss that "at-risk" term later.) Though it may seem like I am using the terms CRE and Equity interchangeably, I don't intend to imply that they mean exactly the same thing. To be sure, they are closely related, but they differ in scope and purpose. My argument in this book is that CRE is a pedagogy

(i.e. a theoretical framework for thinking about teaching and learning) that is most appropriate for closing Equity gaps. Equity work is the sum total of the pedagogical and systems-level tasks of operationalizing the values of Equity in real-world contexts.

Ultimately, it is wrong-headed to try to define Equity in education outside of the consideration of what the construct of Equity requires of us. The operationalization of an Equity mindset into thoughtful practices is the work of Equity. Equity cannot be effectively described without a multi-angle view of the action and the motivations that underscore the action. The actions of the culturally responsive teacher are altogether a function, product, and extension of an Equity mindset. You will have, at best, a partial understanding of the effectiveness of a culturally responsive educator without the full view; or, at worst, you'll miss the most valuable learning to be gained from the models of brilliant teaching because of a misplaced, singular focus on the technical skill. Talking about Equity in theoretical terms should invoke action in our practice, and those actions should evoke further insights which, in turn, frame choices and compel further action. As much as anything, that's my message to schools and the people who animate them.

What Equity Is Not

For some, it may be easier to understand Equity by what it is not. Equity is not equality. These are closely related paradigms, but they represent two different commitments to the notions of fairness and opportunity. The pursuit of Equal Educational Opportunity (EEO) is a central part of the larger American Civil Rights narrative (Tesconi & Hurwitz, 1974). EEO is well represented by the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* case (*Brown*). The landmark *Brown* decision ruled that American public schools could no longer legally segregate children based on race. Separate was deemed "inherently unequal." In other words, the goal of equality in that historical moment was to provide the same learning opportunities (at least in terms of which schools students attended) as a measure of fairness. If sameness was provided in terms of inputs, then equality could be said to have been achieved. Thus, the notion of EEO promotes fairness by giving everyone the

same thing. But equality defined this way is only valid as a fair opportunity construct if everyone starts from the same place and is able to perceive the opportunity on the same terms. That is, opportunities can only be considered equal if students are similarly able to justify the investment of risk and effort required of them in order to be successful (Howe, 1989). The inputs must be equally effective in conveying the meaningfulness of the opportunity, or the opportunity itself will undoubtedly advantage some groups over others. Unlike Equity which identifies outcomes at the finish line of schooling as the measure of fairness, equality focuses on the inputs at the starting line.

Educational Equity is about fairness with a focus on outputs. Like EEO, Equity is about ensuring that students have access to meaningful opportunities. Equity, however, posits that equality isn't necessarily fair because the social, economic, historical, and political contexts in which students learn impact how they perceive and are able to take advantage of the educational opportunities available to them in school. These sociohistorical implications can create barriers to both group and individual participation that make some opportunities less accessible and less meaningful than others. This means that where equality is served by sameness, Educational Equity, by definition, compels difference – because different students need different inputs to support their fair opportunities to learn. In the Equity way of thinking about opportunity, sameness is almost inherently unfair because it assumes that everyone's potential success is equally served by identical inputs; but in the performative sense, it isn't Equity if it isn't acting in ways to close opportunity gaps. Thus I define "fairness" as the differentiating process through which Equity is achieved.

Zero-sum Game Thinking

Equity as a paradigm is challenging for so many of us educators because we've been largely indoctrinated with an equality frame of reference for understanding the concepts of fairness and opportunity. In addition, equality is (seemingly) much easier to invoke in practice. It (theoretically) requires much less of us to give everyone the same thing; but to differentiate according to need seems to be a more daunting task. To some, Equity arguments feel like we are making excuses for

underperforming students and communities. To others, it feels like we are giving unfair preference to specific student populations. They ask, *But shouldn't I just treat all my students the same as everyone else? Shouldn't I just love them all equally?*

While I would never tell a teacher not to love all of their students with equal enthusiasm, it's rarely the case that we would think of sameness of love as an expectation in other parts of our lives. When giving talks, my friend and colleague Pedro Noguera will often ask: "Who in here has more than one child?" And when many hands go up, he'll say sincerely: "Look around everyone. These are the experts on Equity." We learn intuitively when it's our own children – or nieces or nephews, or grandchildren, or siblings, or parents, or grandparents, etc. – that to love someone authentically means precisely to love them knowing they aren't a carbon copy of their counterparts. Even when our own children share the same DNA, live in the same house, eat the same food, and attend the same schools – we know that we must engage in our relationships with them differently according to their individual personalities and our unique histories with them. In our personal lives, we understand that kind of love to be the highest expression of care rather than some inconceivably impossible abstraction to consider.

Our intuitive understanding of Equity is undermined by our misconceptions of what it means in practice. In recent times, Equity has been politicized as an offspring of entitlement ideologies. Equity, say its detractors, means we give something more to someone who doesn't really deserve it; and further, it's unfair to take an opportunity away from one child to give more to another. This "zero-sum game" interpretation of opportunity is especially prevalent in counter-arguments to Educational Equity. Unlike economic opportunity, which we are more likely to think of as a positive-sum construct, those who oppose the notion of Educational Equity see opportunity as a finite resource (Game theory, 2008; Mulligan, 2009; Greenhill, 2015). In matters of financial opportunity, however, most are more inclined to see it as a generative entity – meaning that where economic opportunity abounds, it creates valuable opportunities for others. When educational opportunity is thought of as a zero-sum game construct, Equity can't be conceptualized as fair because the perceived finite nature of opportunity makes it impossible to differentiate support without

under-serving some part of the population. This is exactly why Equity is such a profoundly challenging concept because it is often presented to us in practice as a zero-sum game scenario.

Mindsets

To be clear, I don't believe that equality is a bad thing; but one must know when equality-inspired mindsets and practices are limited in their capacity to meet the expectations of fairness. Equality, by itself, does not ensure that all students will receive what they need to allow for them to perceive their school opportunities as meaningful and thus worthy of their engagement. Here it makes sense for us to step back and specifically define "mindset" in order to reduce the variability in our terminology as much as possible. One of the pioneers in the field of psychology, William James, defined mindsets as the abstract and/or concrete representations that precede goal-directed behaviors including decision-making (James, 1890). Carol Dweck (2008) among others similarly describe mindset as beliefs, attitudes, values, and dispositions – particularly the views one adopts of one's own abilities and intelligence – that affect the way people lead their lives in all sorts of ways. Mindsets can be learned and shared in specific social/cultural spaces often to the advantage of the group's insiders and in response to the conditions of their physical and emotional environment. Mindsets inform the ways in which groups assign meaning to social situations including the extent to which an opportunity is perceived as fair and meaningful (Barry & Halfmann, 2016; French II, 2016). Taken together, the concepts, assumptions, beliefs, methods, and notations that comprise our mindsets contribute to our subjective views of the world and are always in play at every moment of our lives.

Mindsets are neither hardwired in the architecture of the human brain nor do they invalidate the agency of human beings to act of their own volition. We can evolve our mindsets, but to do so reliably requires a conscious and focused effort. To evolve our mindsets is also difficult emotional work because it inevitably will challenge assumptions that we haven't before rigorously vetted; and upon closer examination, these are instrumental assumptions on which key beliefs hinge. The emotional investment of Equity work starts with committing to

the conscious capacity for pushing one's own thinking, which means considering the evidence at all times – including the evidence of our own need to evolve. Brilliant teachers do this. Brilliant teachers are brilliant in part because they persistently pursue brilliance. They evolve because they are constantly looking to grow their practice. To pursue brilliance is to consider that there may be better ways to support all kiddos. (That commitment is, in fact, the only common characteristic I can attest to in all of the teachers whom I have ever thought of as brilliant.)

To evolve our systems and practices to be more equitable means we must be intentional about our growth with a performative understanding of Equity in mind. I think of growth (both individual and organizational) as driven largely by questioning. Individuals and organizations that grow do so because of a commitment to continually ask questions about what is and isn't working and what can further be done to fulfill the mission(s) at hand. This is the essence of what I think of when I hear the term *growth mindset*. Similarly, if Equity is to become performative, we should be thinking of Equity as a dynamic endeavor, and we should be deliberate in marrying the questions we are asking about Equity with an ongoing inquiry about pedagogy.

Equity Questions

So What Are the Questions That We Ask about Equity?

The questions we ask about Equity are about whom we teach, as in: What do our students most need to be successful? What groups of students are underperforming relative to others? How have these gaps been previously understood? What is the social, historical, and political context that frames the educational opportunities for underachieving groups? What are the assumptions we make about students and their abilities? How does the policy- and practice environment reflect an understanding of the assets of the students and communities served by the school?

We should be willing to ask these questions in ways that lead us to rich and complicated answers, but it is critical to consider the

context that shapes students' perceptions of opportunity given the sociopolitical realities of the communities served by the school. These questions lead us to a deeper understanding of the nature of the gaps in opportunity, performance, and achievement.

What Are Equity Gaps?

An Equity gap is anything that might undermine the perception of a learning opportunity as meaningful, attainable, and worthy of investment by the student – either as a function of how a student may (or may not) be positioned to take advantage of an opportunity, the design of the opportunity itself, or even the awareness that the opportunity exists. Equity gaps affect how students perceive their opportunities in school, but not all Equity gaps originate in school or classroom practices. There is much evidence of the existence (and persistence) of broad, societal inequities that subvert educational opportunities for vulnerable student populations. Here, I will not go into great depth; but in terms of education outcomes, students of color and specifically Black and Latinx-identifying students are more likely to be overrepresented in disciplinary actions, underrepresented in gifted and talented programs, and more likely to be taught by less-qualified teachers in high-poverty and racially segregated schools (Sirin, 2005; Clotfelter, Ladd, Vigdor, & Wheeler, 2007; Owens, 2016; Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). These school realities can be linked to larger societal racial and income inequalities including patterns of (un)employment, health outcomes, and the disproportionately harsh conviction and sentencing of racial- and ethnic minorities in the American criminal justice system (Alexander, 2010; Stevenson, 2014; Rosenberg, Groves, & Blankenship 2016). The trends of racial-, ethnic-, and income inequity are clear and persist over time.

Equity gaps are neither surprising nor unexpected given the United States' history with race tracing back to the earliest incarnations of the "American experiment." This was characterized by the oppression, displacement, and subjugation of millions of human beings in the interest of establishing the nation as a space for European immigrants to find economic prosperity and religious freedom unhampered by

the restrictions of class and intolerance from whence millions fled in distress. That these pursuits came at the expense of non-White people required an ideology to justify the mistreatment. This meant that the indigenous people of the continent were labeled savages, and the Africans brought in bondage inferior, incapable, and unworthy of freedom. While the purpose of establishing nascent nationhood was served by the effective genocide of indigenous American peoples and removal from their traditional homelands, slavery and its ideological compatriot, racism, were essential components of the original economy.

Race

Race is, of course, a difficult historical matter for us to discuss. It makes so many deeply uncomfortable; but discuss it we must because the United States of America invented a form of codified, race-based prejudice that was integral to its growth and development – and the American brand of racism continues to present an obstacle to the nation's ideals of inalienable freedom and opportunity without bias. American racism gave license to a brutal form of slavery and oppression arguably unlike any the world had seen before. Contrary to nearly every earlier form of slavery, the enslaved men and women of African descent in America were held in bondage in a society that espoused freedom and equality as its chief collective virtues. In order to validate the institution of slavery, White America justified its bondage of enslaved Africans and their descendants by rationalizing that they were sub-human and thus, unworthy of the same rights and privileges which Whites were willing to risk life and limb to protect. Racism bridged the schism between the ideals of freedom and the realities of slavery and set into motion a centuries-long conflict rooted in the effort to preserve the privilege of the powerful at the expense of those whose humanity had not been embraced in the earliest iterations of the American opportunity covenant. Racism, even after the abolition of slavery, was the energy that engendered the systemic denial of social and economic opportunities for the descendants of Black slaves as well as other non-White persons living in America (Kendi, 2016). These historical intersections of racism, economic condition, and political

disenfranchisement underlie present-day realities rendering some groups more vulnerable to school underperformance than others.

We resist the discussion of race at the risk of our own peril because to seek improvement without addressing our ugliest truths is to deny ourselves access to some of the most useful insights available to us as educators. So much of the work of Equity involves facilitating learning experiences and conceptual understandings that students are able to see as meaningful and worthy of their engagement; and identity is always a prime factor in that equation. The story of one's identity is central to the perception of opportunity. If students' identities are muted (or altogether ignored) for the convenience of educators, some students will feel subjugated in ways that limit their frames of reference and capacities for accruing understandings. At the same time, we must avoid stereotyping our students based on their racial, ethnic, and other social identity markers because while everyone participates in some shared identity group, we also have individual agency that allows us to color outside of those identity-group lines. It is also true that there are a range of interpretations and opinions on race even within racial groups. Race is experienced in the context of other social classifications and identity markers so that no one can be said to have had an identical racialized experience to anyone else. Though some may try to exploit these truths as contradictions, in any number of instances, in any given school with any particular student, race may mean everything or nothing at all. We must make ourselves available for the discomfort inherently accompanying the topic of race, and we must also be prepared to dismiss everything we think we know about race to allow students to show us who they are as unique individuals with agency and their own catalogue of concepts, contexts, and lived experiences.

In my work as a coach and technical assistance provider in school districts across the United States, my task has been to support teachers in translating what the research and literature say about Equity into instructional practices. That has often been a challenge for a number of reasons. For one, I am Black, and most of the teachers I work with are White… and many White people don't like talking about Equity because they know it involves race; and many White people don't like talking about race – and especially not with Black people. There are

some White people who were taught that it is improper and impolite to talk about race. There are others who have been willing but feel injured from previous efforts at engaging in discussions about race. Some White people think that talking about race means they will be personally blamed for American racism. Still others think they know everything they need to know about race, and therefore the conversation does not apply to them.

Productive Discourse on Race

For whatever the reason, talking about race can be difficult. I've developed some mental guidelines that, for me, have been helpful in creating productive spaces for the necessary and difficult discourse. For instance, I think we are wise to avoid a spirit of blame in our conversations about race. Racism is an American problem that stains our reputation abroad and impedes our greatness at home. The question of personal blame is mostly moot at this point. To every White teacher who doesn't want to be blamed for racism, I say to you that there are some problems that are not your fault, but because of position and influence, you, bearing no blame, still have responsibility because you are in a position to address the problem. To confront these issues we must engage in an honest and ongoing reflection about how race, culture, and identity impact our lives and others around us. In addition to reflection, we should also seek opportunities to listen to others whose cultural and social vantage points differ from ours. But the way I see it, these are things that decent people should be doing anyway. I do believe that this kind of purposeful disposition to growth is good for the practice of teaching, but I also think it will make you a better parent, a better bae, a better colleague, and an all-around better person. And why would anyone *not* want to be a better person?

I'm also not interested in participating in competitions for title of the most aggrieved. I feel clear that racism – and in particular the unequivocally evil institution of American slavery and the racism, culture, and beliefs that sustained its legal practice for 239 years – has had a profound impact on the lives of people of African descent in particular and people of color generally. I also feel clear that Jim Crow and other formal and informal segregation practices continue to influence

the way people experience their lives and opportunities on a day-to-day basis. I think that racism has evolved in a lot of ways (though there are still some old-fashioned, hood-wearing racists in America). I believe that privilege is a real thing, and I think it's silly to argue otherwise. I believe that privilege is incredibly durable and adaptive. The thing about privilege is that the experts on privilege are the persons who don't have that privilege. For example, I am a man. While I acknowledge my male privilege, I also know that the group of people most likely to be able to discern my male privilege even better than me are those who don't have my privilege – i.e. people who don't gender-identify as men, namely women. I also know that there are many groups who have suffered at the hands of White Supremacy, and I would rather not compete with them in any Oppression Olympics. I don't want the prize of being the most impacted nor do I want to be seen as diminishing another human being's suffering in order to prove mine.

I believe the work of Educational Equity is an effort to end suffering caused by and through inadequate school experiences for kiddos and their communities. I don't want to reverse the hegemonic structures so that others will be oppressed in the ways that my community has. I don't want to improve my own ranking in the hierarchy of suffering. I want my work in education to disrupt those systems that perpetuate inequity so that we can be the great schools we need for the great nation we aspire to be. I find resolve in the hope that America can be great for everybody. My biggest concern relative to the issue of race in the discussion of Equity is that a problem can't be solved unless the parties involved are willing to deal with the problem – and not just the pretty parts, but the parts of the problem that make us most uncomfortable.

Questions about Opportunity

I say that the concept of Equity can't be separated from the work of Equity because by definition and dint of mission, Equity is an action-oriented paradigm that requires something of those who understand it. Equity work requires that we ask questions about opportunities to learn in order to highlight gaps. Once one is aware that an Equity gap exists, one must either determine to take actions to close the gap or

become a defacto contributor to its persistence through silent compliance. Inequity requires inertia to maintain its status quo.

If you accept the premise that Equity is a performative construct, it must be conceded that the understanding and practices of Equity are indistinguishable from one another. That means that when we talk about Equity we should be asking questions like: What opportunities exist for our students to leverage their backgrounds and identities in the interest of school achievement? What kinds of teaching techniques work best in centering the voices and experiences of student groups historically underserved by schools? What do our racial- and ethnic-minority groups report about their opportunities to learn in schools? How are the identities of students reflected in the staffing of the school? How has the school created space and connection for partnerships with the communities served by the school? In what ways does the policy and practice environment reflect the commitment to understand, validate, and show authentic care for the most vulnerable of the learners and those historically underserved?

I have found that if we don't place our deliberation of pedagogy in the same spaces where we are giving thought to Equity, we may either leave educators unsure about how to apply the principles in their work with students or miss the chance to lean into some of the more difficult conversations relative to race and identity that are necessary for us to have in order to better understand the gaps we wish to close. In fact, the absence of pedagogy in Equity discourses consigns the work of Equity to precarious circumstances. If we talk about Equity and not pedagogy, the Equity arguments can be dismissed as pedagogically irrelevant. The problem with talking about Equity in isolation is that the discussion of Equity (like many theoretical constructs that tie together multiple concepts) has a certain tendency to stall, in that, without a practice arm, it begins to feel repetitive, irrelevant, and specious. People can legitimately (or subversively) ask: "Okay, but after studying the problem of Equity, what can we do?"

Which brings us to another critical issue.

Questions about Pedagogy

Pedagogy is the science and study of teaching and learning. It is how we think about tools, policies, and strategies for teaching. Pedagogy, though, if not focused on the needs of students (and particularly students whose growth is stagnant), fails to be progressive in the adaptations available to us. New tools emerge all the time, thus making different results possible – not because the tools change the purpose of pedagogy, but rather because the tools expand the limits of what is possible given the restrictions of previous tools and the ever-changing contexts in which pedagogy occurs. Further, if we talk about pedagogy without talking about Equity, we are more prone to rationalize the predictability of underperformance patterns because we can more reasonably say: "I've successfully taught this way for a long time. If it doesn't work now it's because something is wrong with the students and not my pedagogy."

What questions are we asking when we talk about pedagogy? We should be asking questions like: Which teaching strategies work best to facilitate rich understandings of the big ideas that matter most in the learning targets? What are the indicators we use to determine success? How will students be able to demonstrate what they know and understand? How are the instruction and assessment differentiated to best convey the understandings and to capture the evidence of all students' learning? How do my teaching practices reflect my own understanding of the social and cultural identities represented in the classroom?

What Are We Teaching?

If Equity questions are the questions we ask about *whom* we teach and pedagogy questions are the questions we ask about *how* we teach, we should also be clear about *what* it is we are teaching, as well. What is our content from the perspective of Equity?

In the internet and information age, schools must prepare students not for specific skill- and knowledge-based careers but rather for personal reinvention. By that I mean that today's students are likely to have multiple careers (and careers within careers) that require

the social, emotional, and intellectual tools to update their skillsets accordingly. More than ever, schools today must prepare students to think because the capacity for lifelong learning is the essential skill for success in the modern economy (Wagner, 2008). The ability to understand complex problems, craft clear thoughts, and concentrate (on tasks or ideas) is the most valued human capital commodity in the modern American workforce. Thus, when it comes to the *what* of their learning, as a classroom teacher, I most want for my students to gain understandings – which are related to but something different than information. With the ordinary person having access to vast amounts of all sorts of data through internet-enabled devices, it is more useful and important that students are taught to be discerning consumers of information than to be able to recall even volumes of it. Discernment, analysis, synthesis, and interpretation are all tools for developing understandings, and when our students understand how to learn, they can better use these strategically in the interest of their own growth.

But what exactly is an understanding? In short, we can think of an understanding as the meaning drawn from concepts whereas concepts can be thought of as categories of words, linguistic expressions, visual images, sounds, and other stimuli taken in through the senses (Barsalou et al., 1993; Barsalou, Simmons, Barbey, & Wilson, 2003). Philosophers and cognitive scientists define a concept as a psychological representation of objects, symbols, events, or actions that are grouped together in relation to some cognitive purpose (Barrett, 2017a). Concepts are integral in the cognitive processes associated with meaning-making (Hofstadter, 2001). Thus, as it pertains to the work of Equity, I have come to think of concepts as the building blocks of understandings; they are useful and often central to a discipline and have lasting value beyond the classroom. Concepts are also a key in our ability as teachers to make a learning experience culturally responsive to any particular student or group of students. That is to say that we are more or less responsive given our capacity for teaching with and through culturally accessible concepts.

Although concepts are not exactly equivalent to meaning, they play critical roles in constructing it. Concepts are the material we use

to build meaning through analogy, which Hofstadter (2001, p. 499) refers to as the core of cognition:

> One should not think of analogy-making as a special variety of reasoning (as in the dull and uninspiring phrase "analogical reasoning and problem-solving," a long-standing cliché in the cognitive-science world), for that is to do analogy a terrible disservice. After all, reasoning and problem-solving have (at least I dearly hope!) been at long last recognized as lying far indeed from the core of human thought. If analogy were merely a special variety of something that in itself lies way out on the peripheries, then it would be but an itty-bitty blip in the broad blue sky of cognition. To me, however, analogy is anything but a bitty blip — rather, it's the very blue that fills the whole sky of cognition — analogy is everything, or very nearly so, in my view.

Concepts to Establish Reference

Concepts establish reference. Concepts represent symbols and situations that provide the basis of establishing reference from its associated word (Barsalou et al., 1993; Hoftstadter, 2001; Barsalou, Simmons, Barbey, & Wilson, 2003; Barrett, 2017a). As an example, the mental library of generic situations for "mother" establishes the reference for "mother" in uses of the word across utterances. These references populate "domains of reference" which then guide how individual references may be employed within specific conceptual contexts.

Once an entity is established as a referent in a particular situation, specialized frames within the corresponding generic situation provide running commentary on the referent. This transaction of thoughts within any group of persons seeking to share understandings is what allows us to update and extend our concepts, including our ability to layer and add nuance to previously conceptualized understandings. In this way, a concept is a referent used to bridge meaning; but it is also that the combination of concepts forms new concepts from old ones, specializes existing ones, and modifies existing frames. For example, when students in the primary elementary grades learn the concept of ecosystem, they understand it as a reference to physical spaces in nature where organisms live together and rely on each other to sustain

an environment that is hospitable to all. This is what a cognitive scientist would call a one-entity, one-frame conceptual reference. But some conceptual combinations may warrant new frames because, though conceptually related, the updates constitute significant new types of entities. So as students reach the higher elementary and secondary grades, the conceptual reference of ecosystem can be employed in combination with other conceptual frames of reference to support the understanding that democratic governing systems, for instance, are intended to support the well-being of many cooperating groups of people in a way that sustains the freedoms and opportunities for all in the environment. A democracy then can be understood as a kind of political ecosystem for humans.

Enduring Understandings

I am a big fan of the work of Wiggins and McTighe (Wiggins, McTighe, Kiernan, & Frost, 1998) who, among others, have centered Enduring Understandings in the design of learning experiences. They've defined Enduring Understandings as "statements summarizing important ideas and core processes that are central to a discipline and have lasting value beyond the classroom" (p. 10). These Enduring Understandings synthesize the concepts students should regularly center and revisit in the study of a particular content area. Importantly, an Enduring Understanding should impact behavior. Understandings are performative in the sense that they are confirmed by how people act differently given the depth of their understandings. Thus, it is fair to say that an understanding qualitatively changes you.

In the information age, in order for students to see their learning opportunities as meaningful, I've found that there is little profitable application in the recitation of facts. Concepts are what allow us to bring order to the information available to us – and through concepts we make meaning that resonates for students. Therefore, concepts are the substance, the essence – the basic unit of understandings – and what we truly want to teach in the modern school.

Even what may seem to be simple concepts often have much more complex constructions than we might think at face value. If we are able to get inside of our concepts, we can better identify the underlying

structures, which then allow us teachers to better leverage concepts to close Equity gaps in the opportunities for students to learn. I discuss this further in Chapter 4, but it's important now to distinguish that concepts can be described both in perceptually objective terms (i.e. object-focused) and also in goal-oriented terms (i.e. goal-focused).

Object- and Goal-focused Concepts

Let's take for example the concept of a phone. Depending on your age and the part of the world in which you were socially and culturally indoctrinated, when you think of the concept of a phone, you might think of a plastic and metal device that sits on top of a desk with a moveable handle into which you speak, which is connected to the base by a flexible cord which is connected to the wall (and the hidden telephone lines that connect to poles and circuits in the beyond) by a cable of some sort. Sometimes a phone has a base but no cord to connect the handset to the base. Sometimes it is more plastic than metal and other times the opposite. Many of today's students have a very different concept of a phone, which is some variation of the smartphone family of electronic devices. When most American teenagers today think of their phone, they are likely to envision a mobile device that isn't connected to any cables unless the phone requires a charge, in which case the phone isn't connected to the hidden universe of telephone lines but rather to an electrical outlet for power. Many students would think of a rectangular-shaped device with a screen that might be touch sensitive that can fit into a pocket or a purse which rarely ever leaves their possession; but there are many objective instances of phones that can fit into the category. There is no single prototype instance that represents that concept, and in fact, some of the devices that fall under the category of phone do not have all of the features of the other objective instances of phones.

Goal-focused concepts, on the other hand, are flexible and adaptable to situations given the purpose for which the object-focused concept is to be employed (Barrett, 2017a). So for example, if we were to consider a purely mental concept such as "Things that Distract Students from Learning," a phone might be one of the first things that comes to mind. Other instances in that category might include stress

from home, gossip among peers, an acne breakout, or a new budding romance with a fellow student. These instances share no perceptual features; this category is entirely a construction of the mind. Yet, our brains group all of these instances together to populate the category. Though these all have different perceptual elements, and it would be highly unlikely to describe these in any way that is objectively similar, they each satisfy the goal-focused conceptual criteria of serving as potential distractions to students' learning.

Our understanding of the world and everything in it is conceptual in nature – either in the objective, descriptive sense or in the goal-oriented sense (Barrett, 2017a). A single object can be part of different goal-focused concepts. A phone does not always have to serve the goal of making a telephone call. In fact, for many of our students, making a phone call isn't among the first things that they say when asked to consider the goals of a phone. Sometimes a phone is used to communicate with people but it may not be through a telephone call but rather a video call or text messages. Or a phone may be indicative of a status symbol, or a phone may be a tool to access social media, or to surf the internet, or to watch videos on YouTube, or even to play games.

The Life of Concepts

But it is important to note that concepts, though represented in the mind with certain prototypes, are an amalgamated grouping and interpretation of multiple object- and goal-focused instances. Not every instance of a concept need have every feature of the conceptual prototype to be recognized as an instance of the concept. This means that every time we draw on a concept to make meaning of anything, we are encountering a unique instance that is unlike any other we've ever before encountered (Hofstadter, 2001; Hofstadter & Sander, 2013; Barrett, 2017a). Even more importantly though is the notion that different individuals and groups of people have different instances populating their conceptual references; and different spaces may evoke different domains of reference relative to specific concepts from others. This means that though there is seemingly a great deal of shared understanding of concepts among the general population, every one of us has our own unique relationship with and

understanding of concepts, and those understandings are a function of the range of instances from which we draw and the social and cultural indoctrinations which have informed how meaning is constructed relative to those concepts.

Since concepts do not objectively equate to meaning, concepts do not have universal meaning. As such, the construction of the meaning of concepts is a function of both our lived experiences and also our social and cultural indoctrinations, which include cultural knowledge. We learn these concepts from birth through our relationships and the customs and habits we are taught. Invariably, and here is a really important point for our consideration: the concepts we learn are fraught with bias. As we learn concepts, we are taught what is right and wrong, good or bad, appropriate or inappropriate in the context of the conceptual prototypes. We see others who share similar conceptual frames of reference to us to be more "normal" than others whose concepts differ in some ways we perceive as significant. In fact, one way to think about identity is in terms of concepts shared with other persons in specific spaces. If unchecked, we are more likely to discriminate against those whose concepts differ greatly from our own because we see them as either odd or inferior (or dysfunctional or derelict); and because we learn concepts from/in the social/cultural spaces in which we are indoctrinated, we tend to hold firmly to them as sacred and true. Alas, many social conflicts result from a perceived clash among concepts.

Yet, the life of concepts in the human brain is anything but static. In essence, every new encounter we have with a concept updates the cognitive database of instances, thus informing the prototypes we associate as conceptual references and benchmarks. In a very real sense, your brain categorizes and arranges references – experiences, objects, actions, senses, and events – to create meaning by uniquely drawing on concepts. And further, when your brain needs a concept, it can construct one by re-organizing references to fit the occasion.

Brilliance

Brilliant teachers have always approached their practice in ways that operationalize an unyielding belief in their own capacity for leveraging

deep and powerful understandings and supporting students' academic identities. In this book, I admiringly refer to pedagogy that engages all students in rigorous thinking while providing opportunities that empower kiddos to use their social and cultural fluencies in the interest of learning as… brilliance. (And I think of brilliance as fluid because I've had moments in which I am brilliant, and others in which I am definitely not.) I know I had my own brilliant teachers who are my personal superheroes for how they invested in me. In fact, I became a teacher because, though I knew I'd never be able to repay mine for their influence on my life, I wanted to play a supporting part in other people's success stories. My teachers lit a passion in me to develop the academic identity that justified the necessary investments in order to be more successful in school. As a young teacher, I struggled. I later came to realize very few don't. Now, I especially love working with teachers because it keeps me close to kids – which is why we do what we do, right? That's what we say all the time… "It's about the kids." Well, if it really is about our kiddos and what they need, then an Equity – not equality – mindset is a much better fit for our work with young people.

And thus we are back to the essential point of this chapter and a foundational presupposition for this book. Equity, as a theoretical construct, is made performative through CRE. Equity work is the design of pedagogy, and the systems in support of it, that are responsive to the needs of students and their communities in order to provide fair opportunities to learn – or a Culturally Responsive Education. This is done, in part, by prioritizing the teaching of understandings and giving consideration to the concepts and conceptual frames of reference we use to structure the pedagogical and policy environment. At the very least, CRE means the responsibility to acknowledge the conceptual diversity that contributes to the differences in how students experience school and the content to which they are exposed therein.

Further, Equity work is grounded in the positive-sum belief that all students benefit from thoughtfully developed learning experiences – meaning that the highest-performing students should receive meaningful opportunities to accelerate and expand their learning while the most vulnerable students receive supports that are just as meaningful

and also intentionally aligned with their specific needs. And since the achievement gaps are most predictive by zip code and race (Tienken, 2016; Tienken et al., 2016), that means that Equity in pedagogy insists on the importance of rigorous and engaging learning experiences for everyone – students of color, low-income students, and also affluent kiddos and White children, as well. *Everyone.*

The Challenges of Equity and Pedagogy

Going forward, there are a few key implications from this chapter on which my further arguments in this book rely. I can best describe these in terms of the challenges they represent.

Social Injustice

First, there are many social injustices and inequities that make life profoundly unfair for a lot of our kiddos. We should object to those inequities because that's what conscious people of good will and integrity do in a multicultural, pluralistic democracy. But I am clear that the single most radical commitment that a teacher can make in the interest of Equity is to be brilliant with our kiddos every day. That is a herculean feat, and I know teachers who do it. I've learned from them. I've taught with them. They're awesome!

I say this to say that I am certain that thought-life and mindset matters in teaching. The things we think about and how we think about those things have a lot to do with the fruit of our labor. The quality of our teaching is, in large measure, a product of the quality of our thinking. When Descartes said, "I think therefore I am," he wasn't just stating a philosophical truth; he was giving us the keys to a difference-making career. Brilliant teachers are thoughtful. Sometimes, they're so good that it almost seems like they're improvising the whole thing, but in my experience, that's almost never the case. These brilliant teachers are thinking – and the ones who are most often brilliant regularly and rigorously *think about their thinking*. They accept the challenge of investigating some of those deep-seated beliefs that are so embedded in our subconscious they evade anything less than our most rigorous contemplations.

Bias

At this deep level of our consciousness, our biases and other automatic assumptions, if unchecked, can corrupt even the best lesson plans. Bias shows up in our conscious and nonconscious choices because our choices are filtered through our concepts and the attendant biases we've inherited with them. At this deep level of consciousness, you are using the lens of your concepts to make predictions about what you will see and how you should interpret the environment around you. That's actual science by the way (Barrett, 2017b). Many of the myriad steps that go into creating powerful learning experiences occur at the level of nonconscious thought, engaging unarticulated beliefs and assumptions about the structure, nature, and expectations of pedagogy. To be brilliant in our most challenging schools, we need lots of people thinking deeply about the intentions of their practice.

Let me be blunt, however. If among your biases (because we all have biases) is the feeling that all [fill in the racial/ethnic group of choice] are characteristically [fill in the stereotyping trope of choice], your struggles with students are to be expected. You have the responsibility to seek out your problematic attitudes around racism, and any other marginalizing mindsets you bring to bear. The responsibility to address and redress your explicit biases is solely your own. No book on teaching is going to help you if you don't do the work of building your own awareness of race and identity. It is hard work, but it is essential to the greater task at hand.

Every day, an individual teacher makes hundreds, maybe thousands of micro-choices – choices that show up in all sorts of interactions with students. When I'm coaching teachers, I pay careful attention to their pedagogical choices. We teachers create with our choices. We have choices of what to teach and how to teach it. The inspiration of these choices is a function of both mindset and purpose. We must see ourselves as agents of Equity if we expect our efforts to yield opportunity-gap closing results. We must accept the responsibility of our choices and commit to using them wisely and in the interest of fairness.

The Challenge of Tools

A challenge of Equity in pedagogy that confronts every teacher revolves around the question of when to stick with familiar tools and models, and when to reach out and embrace those that offer new possibilities given the nuance of unique and changing contexts. The answers in practice to these questions are as much a function of tools as they are of one's beliefs. Teachers are like curators of art gallery exhibitions in that we make inspired choices based on what we want the viewers of the art to experience. Teachers curate spaces with their strategies and their intentions for the learning experiences of students. Through careful attention to and reflection of one's craft, the tools of the most brilliant and culturally responsive teachers become an extension of their own intentions. There is no checklist, however. These tools and methods are expressions of our convictions about the purpose of education and the capacity for teachers to effect the desired end(s). We have choices in what to teach (content) and how to teach it (pedagogy). The strategies we choose in teaching should reflect the needs of our learners (Equity), and the inspiration for those choices is a function of our clear-eyed view of the purpose of American public schools. If the public purpose of schools in a multicultural, pluralistic society is lost, and the individual benefit is prioritized in developing the policy and practice environments of schools, we will have relinquished the moral high ground that justifies the investment of all Americans into the institution. Brilliant teaching is a performance of the commitment to Equity, and I think of the work that happens at the intersections of Equity and excellent pedagogy as Culturally Responsive Education.

The Challenge of Outcomes

And lastly, we cannot say that we have achieved anything remotely resembling Equity until we are confident in asserting that rigorous and engaging learning experiences are available to students in the communities traditionally marginalized due to factors of race and class. Statistically this means that we cannot say Equity has been achieved until neither the identities of students – particularly their racial and

ethnic identities – nor their socioeconomic status are reliable predictors of school achievement and performance. Until those trajectories of school success are disrupted, there is Equity work to be done.

OPERATIONALIZE THIS!

Create Community Through Learning Experiences

In the method-acting unit, Ms. Allen and I wanted our students to feel inspired to deepen their understanding of the critical literacy concept of revision while engaging as part of a writing community. In fact, we think of this as their right. In community, members of the group share experiences that further clarify and define their collective identity. The idea of community was fleshed out experientially when we had the students use their video recordings as texts for conferencing with their peers. Students watched and discussed what they saw in the videos, receiving support in clarifying how their writing could be improved. What they saw (or didn't see) in the videos was translated to what was present (or not present) in their writing. The technology was an instrument used to capture another representation (or draft if you will) of the writer's intent. It was a medium through which the disconnect between the writer's mechanics and meaning could be more explicitly uncovered.

We feel like our students should have the opportunity to develop their tools as writers by learning with and from other kiddos whose skills and understandings are part of a whole, functioning supportive system in which every member gets to contribute something that is valuable to others. We think of this as a goal for every content area, but especially literacy in which the skills of communication are developed. Most writers benefit from the support of a community built on camaraderie and common goals. We think it's our students' right to build these skills in community because identity is a function of relationships, and our kiddos are best served in constructing their identities as writers inside of a community of writers. We think it's patently unfair to ask students to invest themselves in such a demanding task as solo actors.

Equity isn't possible without the element of connection. Our students and the communities we serve must feel connected to us, and we are better teachers when we are connected to them. The method-acting

learning experience itself allows for us, their teachers, to better understand our students as writers and deepen our relationship with each individual kiddo while they are also able to receive support and feedback from each other as they think rigorously about their writing. These goals of meeting the needs of our students through community complement their own relationship with writing, their identities as writers, as well as their technical understanding of writing concepts such as voice. They enjoyed the deep conversations about their writing, and they had a clearer sense of what they needed to do to more effectively deliver on their intent. Ms. Allen always works hard in the classroom, but her efforts in this unit were magnified through the support she gave to each kiddo, which in turn reverberated throughout the entire writing community as students acted on their understandings and incorporated them into the feedback they gave to each other. It was a splendid illustration of a positive-sum learning experience where the resources effectively support *everyone's* opportunities to think rigorously and not just a select few.

Challenge Your Learners to Stretch Beyond Their Comfort Zones

In this unit, our students' engagement needed to be driven by a sense of productive dissatisfaction. We wanted our kiddos to find underdeveloped meaning and technical limitations in their pieces. We wanted them to feel greater agency than we had seen prior in both their commitment to and stamina for revision because with the experience of effectively communicating their meaning to an audience, they would know first-hand the power of the writer. But a student isn't a writer until they internalize a command of the tools of composition in the direction of their own goals for a piece. That sense of connection to the writing process cannot be manufactured by anyone outside of the writer themselves, though good teaching can facilitate such encounters.

Success in this learning experience meant that our students would emerge with a deeper conceptual understanding of revision, knowing it's less about correcting mistakes (though it is about that too) and more about an undertaking in which they visit and revisit their text to

confirm, deconstruct, and rebuild the piece until it matches their intent in meaning and style. In the production of any writing piece, revision is a complex problem, and like any complex problem, it doesn't rely specifically on simple algorithms to solve. It requires creative approaches. We wanted our students to find a greater commitment within a peer group of fellow writers to the task of revision than what we had previously seen, and we needed to create new pathways for our kiddos to understand how to present their thoughts in clearer terms.

Revision is, by definition, an inherently challenging endeavor because each piece requires something different of us as writers in order to develop it effectively. As such, revision always challenges our abilities as writers in ways that are unique to both the writing task and our identities as writers in any given moment. Through this experience, our students were also able to learn some of the "soft" skills necessary in effectively giving and receiving feedback. No one can know everything, and thus we are all assisted by being able to participate in networks within which we can share support.

Design Inter-disciplinary Units for Richer Learning Experiences

The academic content of the personal narrative piece itself fell within an inter-disciplinary (writing and social studies) unit on the westward movement. We wanted our students to learn about the events of the expansion of the United States farther toward the Pacific Ocean – but we thought it essential that our students were able to understand these historical events from multiple perspectives, including those of the indigenous peoples who had lived in what is now the continental United States for thousands of years prior to the arrival of European explorers. Our personal narrative writing required that students developed their pieces from the perspective of an indigenous person. To be effective, their writing had to leverage empathy for a historical point of view frequently overlooked, which meant they had to cohesively bring together multiple themes (historical, geographic, social) into a piece that could have reasonably been told through the experience of one individual. We wanted our students to write from a sense of personal connection and

inspiration. They had to first think like their protagonist before they could tell their story in writing. The students had to be strategic about the presentation of their voice. In this way, their writing choices extended beyond the mechanical and into something more imaginative and adaptive.

In the language of our fourth-grade curriculum, we wanted students to "show, not tell" – which is the term used to describe the writer's use of techniques and tools that allow the reader to experience the story more vividly through actions, thoughts, senses, and feelings rather than trite exposition, summarization, and description. We especially emphasized the writer's tools of dialogue and elaboration. Taken together, this is a pivotal conceptual understanding for fourth-grade writers because it requires that they rigorously consider the audience for their writing outside of themselves. To think beyond one's own interpretation of the piece in order to anticipate the interpretations of an audience is an inherently rigorous way of composing because it requires that students critically analyze (and predict) the impact of their author's craft (literary devices, viewpoint, dialogue).

The first draft of their writing was about what we expected with none of the pieces from even our strongest writers meeting our hopes for showing and not telling. Before giving our kiddos any feedback on the pieces, we introduced them (through a YouTube video mash-up) to the extra-prickly Stella Adler and Lee Strassberg. We got a few giggles from the students as these iconic acting teachers cantankerously directed their students to find deeper inspiration for performances. As we listened to Adler and Strassberg encourage their students to use their emotion to create greater histrionics in their acting, we highlighted the themes of imagination and concentration along with histrionics as three essential elements and goals for our kiddos' writing, as well. Our Equity mindset informed our pedagogy through the use of our tools and techniques. We wanted our students to push their thinking around the idea of revision; and we wanted to do it in a way that they would be able to see the classroom community as a viable resource in support of their growth as writers. Our pedagogy was designed specifically to support our students through the uncertainty of composition.

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