

## Beware of Equity Traps and Tropes

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**How shortcuts and default practices can get in the way of meaningful school equity efforts.**

Ensuring high outcomes for all in schools is not a task that can be checked off a list. Equity isn't a destination but an unwavering commitment to a journey. It can be easy to focus on where we hope to land and lose sight of the deliberate *daily* actions that constitute the process.

There are no shortcuts for true equity, and yet the pressures of the job leave educators constantly trying to find those shortcuts. Day-to-day fires and the weight of the system make it enticing to hold others, and not ourselves, accountable.

Instead, educators need to reorient themselves to working *toward* equity. This requires us to:

- Acknowledge that our systems, practices, and narratives are designed to perpetuate disparities in outcomes for Black and brown students—thus, there is no path to equity without a consistent antiracist approach.
- Deliberately identify barriers that predict success or failure and actively disrupt them.
- Consistently examine personal identity, bias, and both personal and collective contributions to the creation and/or reproduction of inequitable practices.
- (Re)allocate resources (tools, time, money, people, support) to ensure every child gets what they need to thrive socially, emotionally, and intellectually.
- Cultivate the unique gifts, talents, and interests that every person possesses.<sup>1</sup>

### Equity Traps and Tropes

In the journey of working toward equity, educators have to be careful not to be detoured by "easy fixes" or changes that don't get to the root of the problem. It takes a radical shift to propel the kind of instructional transformation needed to get to deep, equitable, and culturally sustaining learning. And there are many traps and tropes that act as land mines to deter educators from this goal. A trap is a mechanism or device designed to catch and retain. It offers a quick entry but does not allow exit. A trope is a recurring theme we've seen happen before, a cliché of sorts. Over our years as educators, we have found ourselves, and have watched others, unintentionally fall victim to the very circumstances we are trying to change—stepping into unsuspected traps and replaying oppressive tropes.

Let's look at 10 common equity traps—and a few tropes we find within them—and deconstruct what it looks and sounds like to fall into these traps.

#### 1. "Doing" Equity

Sometimes educators treat equity as a series of tools, strategies, and compliance tasks versus a whole-person, whole-system change process linked to culture, identity, and healing. We've been taught to find the framework, the new observation checklist, or the new teaching approach and to implement it without deeply understanding what we are doing and how it connects to our overall goals. Working toward equity does not come with a pre-set program or toolkit that simply needs to be implemented. The work requires us to understand the specific ways inequity plays out

in our context, to engage in praxis—the integration of constant reflection and action— and to engage in a continuous cycle of learning. "Doing equity" reduces the complexity of the work to a set of straightforward tasks without thinking about the school as a complex ecosystem requiring a holistic approach to change.

## **2. Siloing Equity**

Look at the strategic plans of many organizations and schools working toward equity. You will likely find a policy, a new "equity" vision statement, or a newly formed task force designed to increase equitable outcomes. These task forces may generate good ideas and even strong plans, but they are often disconnected from the overall work of the school or system. For example, if the equity task force sets a priority of increasing staff diversity, but the broader staff cannot articulate those goals, then working toward equity in the task force is likely a siloed effort. If the task force meets as a unit, but never engages with any other body in the system—*especially* those related to instruction—the work toward equity is likely siloed. Siloing equity leads us to believe that equity is separate from instruction, which is separate from culture, which is separate from every other aspect of student experience and learning.

## **3. The Equity Warrior**

The Equity Warrior is an incredible educator, often treated as a martyr to the work. This person is eager to push their colleagues and school forward and willing to take on significant additional work to bring the team along.

Unfortunately, the Equity Warrior can easily become the default holder of the school or system's vision for equity, allowing colleagues to opt out, stay inside their comfort zones, or refuse to invest in their own equity learning, which is critical to the change effort. When "siloing equity" is at play, this person is often asked to be the lone voice. Equity Warriors can be elevated for their contributions or sometimes obliterated for them. In either scenario, the work rests on their shoulders and if they are not present, the work tends to fizzle out.

Not all Equity Warrior experiences are created equal. We find two tropes within this trap, each of which are difficult for the persons involved. The first is the Lone Ranger of Color and can be hard to spot in early stages. A school team is excited to elevate the leadership of a staff member of color and shower him or her with praise for taking on the work. As time goes on and the work gets deeper, the burden on the Lone Ranger of Color begins to increase. The Lone Ranger asks colleagues to demonstrate collective and cross-racial leadership for equity, only to have white colleagues treat these requests as an add-on ("I already have too much on my plate."). Meanwhile, the Lone Rangers are asked to be the resident culture and behavior specialists when white colleagues are unsure what to do. In the worst-case scenario, they are encouraged to bring ideas to the table, but when they step into their power and express a dissenting view, they have the devastating experience of being subtly or overtly reprimanded.

The second trope, the Great White Hope, rests in a savior mentality—the belief that it is this person's responsibility to rescue students of color from an oppressive situation, or even from themselves. This leader has been to anti-racism conferences, read equity literature, and is committed to the cause. The problem arises when we view this leader as an equity "expert" rather than a dedicated, lifelong equity *student*. We are in dangerous territory when this leader is elevated for her warriorship while silencing the leaders of color around her. This leader may be well-read, but most books, curriculum, and resources that guide her approach come from white authors.

This leader must be vigilant in developing awareness of how unchecked privilege can undermine equity efforts, as she has the potential to undermine this work under the guise of heroism. White leaders must be careful of their

approach to leadership and see much of their work as uplifting the voices of others, holding other white people accountable, and taking action in coalition with people of color.

#### **4. Spray-and-Pray Equity**

Many school leaders are convinced that if they just get the right trainer, everything will be "fixed." The staff will become more equity-centered. A common refrain we (as trainers ourselves) hear is, "If we just train our teachers around their implicit biases, then they will treat students better." While such training may benefit staff, training without a commitment to ongoing learning and development will likely result in temporary or no change. Sleeter found that even when teachers receive long-term daily training for a full six weeks, any change in their practice dissipates within three months.<sup>2</sup> Authentic commitment to working toward equity requires a comprehensive approach to capacity-building, including coaching, reflection, and collaborative learning processes, not a spray-and-pray approach.

#### **5. Navel-Gazing Equity**

An example of navel-gazing equity is when staff members complete training around bias, privilege, and identity, but never take that work into any other domain of the school. How do bias and privilege show up in our academic counseling systems, disciplinary procedures, grading, and other areas? Transformation requires investment in personal and interpersonal development, awareness and creation of shared cultural practices, and the redesign of inequitable systems—all at the same time. It is easy to spot navel-gazing equity when a group of staff members participate in bias training and then proceed to engage in instructional and leadership planning in a business-as-usual fashion without applying the personal work aimed to transform the system.

#### **6. Structural Equity**

Structural equity is the converse of navel-gazing equity. Many eager educators are so ready to radically change their systems that they make the biggest shift they can to disrupt an inequitable system—for example, exchanging the use of suspensions for restorative justice. There is clear research that suspensions can cause great harm to students,<sup>3</sup> and making systematic shifts to counteract those effects is a courageous move. However, if you make a seismic shift without recognizing the political, social, and cultural impact of the change, then that change is doomed to fail. Ask yourself: Does our staff understand and agree with this new approach? Are we well-grounded in both the theory *and* the practices? What instructional and leadership practices will we need to change to make this more than a cosmetic shift? How much time will we need to invest in starting and reinforcing the shift? How will we need to engage our families in the change process? People don't accept changes simply because they are executed at a structural level. There must be an equal investment in the interpersonal, cultural, and social dimensions for all of the players involved in the process. We set ourselves up to flounder if we fail to align structural changes with the deep learning our teams must do to actualize them.

#### **7. Blanket Equity**

Ever heard the phrase, "There's an app for that"? Well, if you want to achieve equitable outcomes, there is apparently a curriculum for that. Students aren't learning at similar levels? *Great, this new curriculum will fix that.* Students don't feel safe and valued? *Great, there is a program for that.* While curriculum can be a helpful tool, schools across the country have made sweeping investments in buying new curriculums, hoping that if educators just

follow the material, all students will achieve. This trap can cause leaders to become hyper-focused on accountability and implementation. There is no substitute for planning with your students' interests, needs, and identity development in mind. There is no curriculum for considering the specific antiracist practices you are (or are not) engaging in based on the intersections of your own racial, economic, or gender positionality. Whether you opt to use curriculum as a tool or not, our work requires stitching together a quilt with many different textures and features. A blanket will not do.

## **8. Tokenizing Equity**

When one school leader who I worked with mentioned his mostly white staff had hired a new dean of culture, my racial antennae went up. I was worried that the school had fallen into a trope that can emerge from the mental model of the Great White Hope leader: "I know everything about leadership and instruction, but culture, climate, and the behavior of our students?

We'll leave that to you." The school appoints one of the few people of color on staff, often a Black or brown person, into the "culture" role. This may be the security guard, the parent liaison, or the teacher who is given the "difficult" class. These cultural leadership roles are extremely important positions, but when a school's staff is predominantly white and the few leaders of color have to play these roles, a dangerous, implicit message is sent: "You are responsible for dealing with 'these' students." The roots of racism run deep.

Tokenizing equity can also look like asking a staff member of color to take on the equity initiative because we assume it is personally important to them. "I know how much equity work means to you. You've helped us realize a lot of our missteps, so I am wondering if you'd be willing to lead our equity task force." We've heard this type of refrain too many times, and it does nothing but deplete our colleagues' internal resources, reinforce racism and oppression, create Lone Rangers, and leave educators who have racial privilege with little responsibility to change.

## **9. Superficial Equity**

Superficial equity essentially amounts to grasping any equity-centered practice with little understanding of its origins, its purpose, and how to engage in it with depth and authenticity. One team we worked with, for example, decided to "do" culturally responsive teaching (CRT). CRT isn't something to "do"; you cannot and should not attempt to engage in culturally responsive teaching or any practice without understanding its history, building deep knowledge of its meaning, and practicing the work on your own. In this particular school, CRT was reduced to practices on an observation checklist, which created a superficial attempt to move toward equity. In another school, educators developed a vision for an equitable, community-based school that served 94 percent Black students, but led the school with a 90 percent white staff. It is nearly impossible to demonstrate to families, students, and staff that your pledge is authentic when your behavior is anti-Black and demonstrates a lack of understanding of what you are committing to doing.

## **10. Boomerang Equity**

Boomerang equity may be one of the hardest traps of all to disrupt. It feeds itself back to the econometric, test-driven education frame we seek to dismantle. Many organizations and schools may actually arrive at a deep understanding of why they are facing equity challenges. However, boomerang equity happens when we move from a deep understanding of our challenge (increased suspensions for Latinx students) to immediately brainstorming

solutions that mirror everything we've ever tried before. "Our Latinx students are being suspended because they aren't engaged. To help them get engaged, we must increase their confidence in school and the support we offer." And then it boomerangs to: "Let's pull them out for intervention. This way, we can help them read more. We will assess them every six weeks and by the end of the year, we should see less suspensions and higher achievement on the state exam." In this example, we've gone from promising analysis to reactive decisions, leaving the team who did such thoughtful work back where they started. We have leapfrogged from problem to solution without taking time to reimagine our approaches.

## Avoiding the Traps

The dominant narrative about what schools are and how they should treat students—especially those of color—has many school leaders stuck in a painful cycle of traps and tropes. Our sense of urgency gets in the way of understanding complexity, and it feels too hard to disrupt the current state of things. We ingest such a constant prescription of how to create equitable change that we sometimes miss the forest for the trees.

But if leaders are aware of the equity traps and tropes, they can see the ways in which the system has set us up for false starts. Our intentions may be spot-on, but if we aren't aware of the moves we are making, we are liable to reinforce the system we seek to dismantle. There are no shortcuts when it comes to leading for equity. If we hope to transform our institutions into vibrant spaces of learning for every student, we must revisit the fundamental purpose of education and commit to a long-term change process.

## Equity Traps at a Glance

<b>Traps and Tropes</b>	<b>Description</b>
Doing Equity	Treating equity as series of tools, strategies, and compliance tasks versus a whole-person, whole-system change process linked to culture, identity, and healing.
Siloing Equity	Locating equity work in a separate and siloed policy, team, or body.
The Equity Warrior	Nesting equity with a single champion and holder of the vision.
Spray and Pray Equity	Engaging "equity experts" to drop in for a training with no ongoing plan for learning or capacity building.
Navel-Gazing Equity	Keeping the equity work at the level of self-reflection and failing to penetrate the instructional core and school systems and structures (such as instructional planning, student tracking).
Structural Equity	Redesigning systems and structures (such as master schedule) without investing in the deeper personal, interpersonal, and cultural shifts.
Blanket Equity	Investing in a program or curriculum, rather than building the capacity of your people to address equity challenges as complex and ongoing places of inquiry.

Tokenizing Equity	Asking leaders of color to hold, drive, and symbolically represent equity without providing support and resources, nor engaging the entire staff in the work.
Superficial Equity	Failing to take time to build equity-centered knowledge and fluency, leading to behavioral shifts without understanding deeper meaning or historical context.
Boomerang Equity	Investing time and resources to understand your equity challenges, but reverting back to recycled, status quo solutions.

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### Reflect & Discuss

- Which equity traps and tropes sound or feel familiar to you?
- How can you and your colleagues become more aware of equity traps and tropes?
- What might be the converse of the traps or tropes you identified?

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Our definition of equity is adapted and amended from definitions offered by Promise54, National Equity Project, and the work of many researchers in this field.

<sup>2</sup> Sleeter, C. E. (1992). Restructuring schools for multicultural education. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 43(2), 141–148.

<sup>3</sup> Losen, D. J., & Gillespie, J. (2012). Opportunities suspended: The disparate impact of disciplinary exclusion from school. Civil Rights Project/Proyecto Derechos Civiles.

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