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INTRODUCTION

Everyone is talking about equity in education, and the topic is leading to ideological conflicts, changes in legislation, and culture wars. Teachers are charged with enacting equity, but they are overwhelmed by the immediate needs of the classroom. School leaders are still gaining clarity on the instructional connections to equity and district leaders are trying to communicate a vision and develop action around equity. Equity work is complex and sometimes hard. Simply talking about equity is difficult. *The Equity Expression* is a guide for equity conversations, and a tool to empower you as an equity change agent.

I will not assume that you and I have a shared understanding of equity, so let's begin by clarifying what we mean by equity throughout this book. **Equity** comprises the actions, beliefs, and behaviors that work together to identify and eliminate barriers to access and opportunities. In the case of K–12 education, equity is what gives the fair treatment, access, opportunity, and advancement to students and educators in a way that facilitates their individual success and belonging.

Most equity conversations can be circled back to the roots of systemic racism, a weed that has run rampant in our country. Some people choose to keep watering those weeds, others are pruning them to placate emotions around the topic, and many educators are working to eradicate the weeds altogether. Equity is a very personal topic and our instructional moves, whether equitable or inequitable, have great impact on students. Although the personal is political, please note that this book is not about the politicization of equity but rather about the deep inner work needed to have conversations around equity that will lead to equitable decision making for students.

The Equity Expression will help you think about equity from a different perspective, center equity in teaching and learning, and it will position you to engage in deep reflection and dialogue about equity. This book is written for classroom teachers but is also applicable to district leaders, administrators, support staff, and stakeholders whose decision making directly influences students.



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Equity is a big topic. It can be challenging to address all the facets of equity—such as bias, access, -isms, inclusion—while meeting the needs of students, teachers, families, and communities. Although educators and stakeholders may share the intention of partnering to help all students learn, we each have different lenses, perspectives, and contexts through which we view situations and experiences. To meet this daunting challenge, we use the Entry Points for Equity.

Opportunities for equitable teaching and learning are everywhere. Entry points help you highlight where those opportunities are—and provide starting points where those opportunities don't exist. The six entry points I've identified help you access your understanding of, and experiences with equity—mindsets, relationships, products, spaces, processes, and systems. The entry points approach to equity focuses on helping educators identify

starting points for equity conversations and key things to consider for decision making.

WHAT THIS BOOK IS AND WHAT IT ISN'T

This book isn't a blueprint for how to solve your school, district, and community equity issues. This book isn't about how to fix all of the problems stemming from hundreds of years of an oppressive business model of slavery in our country. *The Equity Expression* will help you talk about equity differently, as it will challenge you to reimagine discourse on equity at the confluence of high-quality instructional content and an excellent and equitable education.

The Equity Expression will help you examine how equity, or the lack thereof, manifests in K–12 education, but it's going to take a different approach to the equity conversation. This book is about how you can enact change by starting from within. Our brains are wired for stories and equity work requires that we be more qualitative in our approach to research, which is why this book will take a conversational tone. Research is respected and referenced throughout this book, but the most important research is happening now in our nation's classrooms every single day.

In this book, I share first-person examples from my twenty-year career as an educator, as well as examples from the lived experiences of other teachers. I shared these experiences to provide insight that can help us all grow in ways that help us better serve our students, not to condemn. Vulnerability through storytelling is hard, and it doesn't always feel comfortable. But stories of self-disclosure are what help us connect to the humanity in one another. If we see ourselves as equity change agents, then we need to start by owning the contexts and identities that we bring to our work.

In other words, if we get vulnerable, and self-reflective, we can start to find opportunities to make our efforts and experiences more equitable. I want you to use the stories in this book to strengthen empathy for our students and fellow educators. I hope that this book will help you gain more compassion for yourself as an equity empowered educator. I know that the exercises and tools that accompany the entry points will encourage you to put equity into action.

HOW DO I USE THE ENTRY POINTS FOR EQUITY?

This book will help you understand how to navigate the entry points so that you can best guide students on their journey of learning. Imagine that you and your colleagues are traveling along parallel roads. Each road has roundabouts that give you opportunities to redirect your path. The roundabouts appear as you continuously grow and improve in your practice. Each road and path inevitably leads to student success. The instructional decisions we

make pave the roads, and the paths present themselves as entry points—opportunities to enact equity in a way that better informs your instructional decisions. Regardless of the path taken, you are always headed toward student success. Wouldn't you want to travel this road?

Whether your answer is yes, no, or maybe, keep reading because this book provides you with an opportunity to expand your thinking around equity. Someone else reading this text is likely thinking that this is just another book on equity, and that they've heard it all before. Let me assure you that using the entry points to make equity actionable in your work is not about doing anything new. Rather, it's about thinking differently, entering the equity conversation from another perspective, and closing the gap between having knowledge about equity and putting it into action with intention and focus. The entry points for equity can support you and your learning team in taking ownership of equity and will help you know when and why to exit the roundabout.

START WITH MINDSETS AND ACADEMIC IDENTITIES

The entry points for equity are designed to be employed when deemed timely, relevant, and meaningful for students. If we truly believe in partnering to help our students learn, then their most immediate needs will dictate where we need to grow and in which direction we should go (i.e., which entry point). You do not have to address the entry points in any specific order, although it's important to note that the entry points are anchored around mindsets, which is the foundation for all other entry points.

Educators' mindsets are directly correlated to their academic identity, assumptions, and biases, and this connection is further explained through the stories and examples in this book. You are probably familiar with identity as it relates to culture, gender, or socioeconomic status, to name a few types of identities that play a part in the multiple systems of oppression at work in K–12 education—from culture wars to the **school-to-prison pipeline**. At the time of writing this book, I identify as a Black woman, so I have a strong affinity to things such as my hair and language that affirm this cultural identity (although this affinity is not unique to being a Black woman). Rooted in my cultural identity is my personal belief that I have the responsibility to empower young girls to feel confident in how they choose to express themselves through hair styles and language choices. This belief has led me to take actions such as mentoring and teaching young girls.

I once had an **academic identity** that was full of unhealthy ideas about math. As a young math student, I found that I could follow the processes and formulas of math, but I wasn't great with the mechanics when it came to problem-solving. If you asked me to explain how to solve a particular math problem, I could describe the right ideas, and why they were important. My ways of thinking about and doing math were usually not affirmed and guided, nor considered within success criteria, which indirectly told me that

I was not a good or successful math student. When it came to following a specific method for solving problems, I would fumble, and ultimately, the parts that I did get about math got lost. I developed an academic identity that associated math success with rote operations. I learned, indirectly, that the rules of math were more important than inquiry and exploration. Those ideas were not healthy because I experienced math as a rigid, linear process, and as a creative person, that made math less accessible to me.

Academic identities are not fixed. It is imperative that we (educators) continue to expand our academic identities through professional learning and reflection.

Academic identities are not fixed. It is imperative that we (educators) continue to expand our academic identities through professional learning and reflection. In the first two chapters of this book, you will uncover your academic identity as a learner, explore how it has impacted your teaching, and learn to navigate the entry points for equity guide. Much of the initial work will allow you to dive deeply and more easily into the other entry points for equity.

The reason I make a connection between the entry point of mindsets and a person's academic identity is because decisions and actions are a result of a belief or behavior. Empowering beliefs about teaching and learning can lead to actions that can have a positive impact on our students. This directly relates to equity in K–12 because all educational decisions impact the teaching and learning experiences of students. I believe that decisions rooted in right thinking will lead to right actions. This book will help ensure that your actions are equitable for all. If you choose to implement the strategies in *The Equity Expression*, you'll be on your way to championing equity for all.

Understanding your own beliefs about teaching, learning, content, pedagogy, and students is essential to operationalizing equity. What is your identity as an educator? Your academic identity, or the dispositions and beliefs that make up your relationship with education, shapes your teaching and learning experiences. I was lucky that I became aware of my math academic identity early on and was able to reflect on how it could influence my instruction. Once I became a math teacher, I was able to employ strategies to help all students thrive in the mathematics classroom.

Our academic identities are constantly being shaped and developed. Our understanding and enactment of equity expands as we grow and change. By applying the entry points to your work, I believe you will begin to transform your practice in ways that result in increased self-determination and intrinsic motivation among young people, which will lead to greater student outcomes.

GETTING THE MOST OUT OF THIS BOOK

Examining equity in K–12 education is important for people who want to create more fair and unbiased learning experiences for students. The chapters in this book progress from self-examination to bigger topics, allowing you to see how we can close the equity knowing–doing gap at the classroom level and how system-level changes can be accessible to teachers and administrators. The purpose of this book is to provide you with a framework through which you can operationalize equity. I want this book to serve as a compass that allows you to personalize your equity work, with greater agency. My intention is to prepare you to engage in deep reflection and dialogue about equity. As such, there are activities, tools, and reflections in each chapter. Also, I’ve invited a few of my educator friends to join you on this journey. They will provide thoughts and insights throughout the book, to support your inner dialogue and prepare you for conversations with other educators.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

Teachers

I wrote this book for educators that lead classrooms and work directly with students. It’s also for educators who have lost (or never had) a belief in equity; those who have been unjustly treated by having the very things that can empower our students (i.e., data) used against them (i.e., for evaluation); or for those who may have deficit-focused or disempowering beliefs that they’ve never fully examined (i.e., that “those” children aren’t capable). The best way for teachers to use this book is to

1. Complete the activities and answer the questions
2. Focus on one entry point at a time and
3. Dive deeper into the content with a community, such as your grade band colleagues or peers

Instructional Coaches and Leaders

Instructional coaches and leaders will also benefit from doing the work in this book, as it will help them lead discussions around equity in schools. I consulted with a seasoned educator and asked her to provide me with suggestions on how to best support others as they use this book to guide their equity journey. Below are her tips for you:

- If you’re doing this work as professional development or in a professional learning community, the facilitator needs to read the whole book in advance and think about potential types of reactions they may

encounter. For each chapter they might identify common questions or areas where participants might push back and think about how they might respond to help shift participant thinking.

- Teachers are really stressed right now, so having an easy way for them to engage with the book is important. Some ways to do this are
 - **Ask teachers what they need.** The book is conducive to writing, yet some teachers might find a video or audio recording a more appealing way to record their thoughts. *How can I support you as a facilitator? How can we support each other as a group? How might teachers like to record or share their reflection?*
 - **Assess teachers' needs prior to reading.**
 - What scares you about this work?
 - What excites you about this work?
 - Describe your experience with equity-focused professional learning.
 - What can we do to make this a safe space for self-exploration?
 - **Hold regular meetings to discuss each chapter.** At the end of each meeting, I think it would be useful to preview the chapter to come (maybe tease something to hook participants, even read an excerpt), and specify the number of reflections and estimated amount of time to complete reflections.
 - **Brainstorm with teachers what will help them stay up to date with readings.** Consider assigning accountability buddies, issuing weekly reminders, and creating an online chat board to share takeaways and ideas.
 - **Fortune is in the follow-up.** After reading each chapter, encourage participants to look for examples of the entry point discussed within their classroom. Teachers should be prepared to share what they notice and wonder the next time you meet as a group. As a culminating project, the group could choose to focus on one entry point to try to implement a change.

FOCUS OF EACH CHAPTER

Here is what is covered in each chapter:

Chapter 1: Academic Identities—Through a series of reflective activities, you will explore how your experiences as a learner and educator have shaped how you think about, engage with, and what you believe about education.

Chapter 2: Mindsets—As you and your learning team use the Entry Points for Equity, I encourage you to begin always with mindsets. This chapter will help you explore how mindsets impact academic identities.

Chapters 3 and 4: Relationships—These chapters will center the importance of building and maintaining psychologically safe relationships with other educators and students so that you can amplify your agency as an equity-empowered educator.

Chapter 5: Products—You'll learn equity look-fors in the tools used to support teaching and learning, and understand the role of cultural responsiveness in products to reflect the ideas and experiences learners will recognize.

Chapter 6: Processes—In this chapter, you'll learn how you can enact equity through teaching and learning processes, while letting day-to-day classroom practices guide your steps.

Chapter 7: Spaces—This chapter will help you examine the environments created for learning and the messages these spaces convey to learners.

Chapter 8: Systems—Be inspired by fellow educators with advice on how to thrive in systems fraught with inequities.

Chapter 9: Activating the Entry Points—Learn how to begin to put equity into action with a structured framework and examples. This chapter will give you opportunities to process and make sense of the entry points.

WHAT DO I NEED TO KNOW AS I READ THIS BOOK?

The three concepts that I want you to know and further understand as you read this book are these:

1. **Equity**—*What it is:* Equity is the fair treatment, access, opportunity, and advancement for students and educators that facilitate their individual success and belonging. *What it does:* Equity identifies and eliminates the barriers to access and opportunities that put students at a disadvantage.
2. **Academic Identity**—The dispositions and beliefs that make up a person's relationship with teaching, learning, and educational topics or subjects.
3. **Entry Points for Equity Guide**—A tool designed to help guide discussions and decision making around equity as it relates to mindsets, relationships, products, spaces, processes, and systems in K–12 education.

Your understanding of these key terms will continue to evolve as you do equity work. Allow yourself grace as you learn and grow. I provide a reflective opportunity in each chapter for you to circle back to these key concepts and reflect on your new learning. Let's practice with a reflection:

REFLECTION

Use the space below to reflect on the key concepts of equity, academic identity, and entry points for equity framework.

- How do the definitions of these concepts connect to what you already know?
- How do the definitions fit with or disrupt your current thinking?
- What are the natural relationships between equity and academic identities?

The entry points for equity are designed to make equity accessible and actionable. As you grow in your equity work, so will your understanding of equity. Some topics may be new to you, and some you will find easy to apply in other ways. I encourage you to start where you are, with what you have, and hold an intention to create better outcomes for students whenever and wherever you enter the equity conversation.

GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT TOOLS

“Begin to see with the eye behind the eye. Hear with the ear behind the ear. Feel with the heart behind the heart. So [you] can see the invisible, hear the inaudible, do the impossible.”

—Michael Bernard Beckwith

It is imperative that you allow time to process and make sense of ideas presented in this book. Reflection exercises are built into each chapter, which will help you connect with your inner self, and your team, as you engage in equity work. The reflections that you share in this guide are true for YOU, so it is important that you honor your truths by writing them down and going deeper to make sense of why they are your truths. You must respond with honesty

and vulnerability in order for the exercises in this book to work. I trust you to do that. (And I also understand that sometimes it's hard to find the words right away. In that case, let your hand doodle on the page as the ideas move from your heart to your head, and onto the paper.)

The exercises and activities will help you examine the messy stuff that comes up as you reflect on your equity work, ideate possibilities for growth and change, and co-create solutions with your colleagues that will lead to improved student outcomes. *The Equity Expression* will help you feel more prepared to have difficult and necessary conversations with your team.

Yes, you'll feel hopeful and optimistic while doing your equity work, but it will not be easy. Equity work is hard. Face it—you're going to uncover some assumptions, biases, and beliefs that you didn't know you held. Face it—you're going to learn things about your colleagues that you wish you could unlearn. Face it—you're going to get vulnerable, which might make you feel raw and exposed. Face it—you are going to use all of this information to grow forward and the outcome will not only be a better you, but better teaching and learning for our students. Utilizing the four steps below will challenge you to FACE it:

1. Facts and Feelings: Identify the facts and name the feelings that arise in you from those facts.
2. Agree and Argue: State what you agree with and what you would argue.
3. Connections: Draw parallels to your own experiences.
4. Epiphanies: Record your “aha's” and takeaways.

If you are using this book in professional development: Please complete the activities in each chapter prior to meeting with your team, PLC, or before attending the equity workshops that align with the book.

AGREEMENTS

In order for this book to work for you, I ask that you commit to the following:

As an equity-focused educator committed to personal growth and professional development in order to better serve our students—

- *I will make time to complete the exercises in this book.*
- *I will tell the truth, with compassion for myself and others.*
- *I will not pass judgment on others, nor on myself.*
- *I will be willing to hear, and try to understand, other people's perspectives.*
- *I will be open to changing limiting beliefs into empowering beliefs.*

Consider committing to these rules of engagement as you have courageous conversations with your colleagues:

- *I will assume good intent.*
- *I will listen without preparing to respond.*
- *I will seek to understand, then to be understood.*
- *I accept that there may be more questions than answers.*
- *I expect that closure may not be reached.*

YOUR EXPECTATIONS

Being clear on your expectations will help set you up for a successful journey as you read this book. Based on the introduction, how might you grow as a result of engaging with *The Equity Expression*? After writing your answer, read the responses from your fellow educators to see what aligns with your expectations. If you find that someone's response differs from yours, consider rereading portions of the introduction and then revisit your answer.

REFLECTION

What type of learning do you expect to experience as you read *The Equity Expression*?



Teacher Commentary

► Based on what I've just read, I will be using the anchor of mindsets to look at our identity as educators and how that affects our instruction and the way we treat and teach our students. I will need to be honest with myself if I want to get the full value of the learning presented in this book.

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There will be exercises that I will need to do and I will need to make sure to not judge those teachers who are not on the same page as myself.

- ▶ This introduction makes it very clear that engaging with this book first and foremost involves a personal reflective journey, that will require honesty and vulnerability on the part of the participant (notice I am not referring to the person reading the book “the reader”). The introduction also makes it very clear that this is not a book providing tools and tips on how to create the “perfect equitable” classroom.
- ▶ Based on the intro, this book is about making equity actionable through the six entry points, examining oneself with lots of self-reflection, and tapping into my academic identities and mindsets as an educator.
- ▶ I expect to reflect on my personal experiences, clearly defining equity, assigning meaning to equity (locating where I am and would like to be), examining my actions while utilizing an equity framework to inform planning practice and high-quality instruction for all students.
- ▶ I expect to examine my actions while utilizing an equity framework to inform planning practice and high-quality instruction for all students.
- ▶ This book makes me think a lot about the airplane safety talk I receive before flying. “In the event of an emergency oxygen masks will drop from the ceiling. . . . Put on your mask before helping others.” Another way to think about that is that any exercise in helping inform practice needs to start with informing oneself. I have a feeling that this is going to involve a lot of learning and unlearning my blind spots in order to truly lean into enhancing equity with others.



Teacher Pro-Tip

I love these activities and I feel like they can be emotionally taxing and take up a lot of cognitive space. You should give yourself space and time in between some of these activities so that the quality of your responses doesn't diminish. I suggest you take time to stop and take a breath, go on a nature walk, listen to some music, and then return to the book. Chapter 1 really helps you dig into academic identities and gets to the heart of where your mindsets lie. It requires intense self-reflection. You will want to spend time on this chapter and take it in chunks. This is arguably the most important (and hardest) part of the book, but it's worth it! It will require you to dig up memories you thought you forgot, perspectives you never had before, and traumas you buried deep down inside.

Equity will always be a key component of teaching and learning. May the examples, strategies, tools, and resources in this book help guide you along your equity journey with ease, clarity, and optimism.