NON-INCLUSIVE POLICY PRESSURES SOCIAL JUSTICE EDUCATORS TO BE PERFORMATIVE

Welcome to Equity Digest! This newsletter is for education stakeholders (e.g. community members, caregivers) who have an interest in supporting educational equity in their school communities. What is educational equity? Educational equity can be defined as beliefs, actions, and policies that enable all students to have access to and participate in quality learning environments and experience successful outcomes. Each Equity Digest explains the concepts and findings of the latest academic research surrounding a particular equity-focused topic. The intent of this periodical is to relay equity concepts and supporting research, "digesting" key findings so you can draw informed conclusions. The Digest also offers ways that you can advance equitable practices in your school community. Enjoy!

Get Informed

Disruption is at the Root of Social Justice Education

In this issue of *Equity Digest*, we are examining the people who operate educational systems at the state education agency (SEA) and local education agency (LEA) levels who intentionally and unintentionally cultivate and sustain educational inequities (Sanborn, Jackson, Moore, Skelton, & Thorius, 2019). We're uncovering and considering how people maintain systemic inequities that marginalize students and families who don't have dominant identity markers (i.e. white, middle-class, non-disabled, cisgender, heterosexual, and protestant (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012, as cited in

Sanborn et al., 2019)). In addition, we'll be discussing how we continue to *other* certain student populations when we don't examine how we make dominant identity markers the standard by which we operate—especially in education. By *othering* we mean portraying a person as an outsider because of their differences, communicating through words or actions that their non-status quo identities make them inferior, and susceptible to being treated as less worthy of respect or less valued (Krumer -Nevo & Sidi, 2012).

It's important to think about the history of social justice education before we employ solutions; in this way we are making informed decisions, and we can begin to address and disrupt marginalizing policies developed at the SEA and LEA levels, and how these policies often push teachers into inauthentic social justice roles (Sanborn et al., 2019).

A Little Background

What knowledge is of most worth (Spencer, 1884)?

Whose way of teaching and learning is the most "correct"? Education is not neutral (Bowles & Gintes, 1976; Potts, 2003; Shujaa, 1995); this means that historically education and curriculum in the U.S. has been rooted in practices and values mostly reflected in white, middle class, cisgender, male, Protestant and non-disabled cultural norms, and not reflective of all students' identities and cultures (Broudy, 1981; Murtadha & Watts, 2005). These practices and beliefs include ideas like "individualism, perfectionism, urgency, power, and progress (Jones & Okun, 2001, as cited in Sanborn et al., 2019, p. 2). For those students who don't possess dominant identity markers or subscribe to these norms, the schooling process becomes further marginalizing if they can't/don't conform. It's up to people who operate educational systems to develop policies and practices that enrich and empower all students, especially considering the continuous growth of diverse student populations (Broudy, 1981, as cited in Sanborn et al., 2019, p. 2).

Social justice education theories.

Social justice education theories work to counteract the systemic oppression historically marginalized students have experienced (Sanborn et al., 2019). These theories recognize the danger of using education as a tool to push conformity to the dominant society's culture and values (Mthethwa-Sommers, 2014, as cited in

Sanborn et al., 2019). This marginalization silences and makes invisible the cultures, contributions and assets of those who do not possess dominant identity markers—counterproductive to authentic social justice education.

In the remaining sections we dive further into authentic social justice education, specifically through 1. identifying policies and practices that may be marginalizing, and 2. through defining and exposing implicit biases and the non-inclusive values of those

Why You Should Care

Non-Inclusive Policy Pressures Social Justice Educators to be Performative

For educators who want to make sure they are attending to all students' growth, especially historically marginalized students, it's important to be mindful that they are using authentically inclusive classroom practices (Moore, Jackson, Kyser, Skelton, Thorius, 2016). For example, what spoken/written language are privileged? Does the curriculum reflect all students' backgrounds and cultures? And do methods and practices attend to all students, or do they tend to reflect the status quo? Being reflective in this way begins to not only open your eyes to ways students may be harmed, but it also make you aware of the actions of the people in the systems around you, recognizing that inequities have been present in policy and practice for a long time (Sanborn et al., 2019).

Equitable and Transformational Approaches

To be an authentic social justice educator, it is important to do the internal work in order to ensure the external work itself is transformative; this requires a level of critical consciousness. Critical consciousness is the ability and willingness to see how power and privilege work to maintain systemic racism and oppression, keeping marginalized groups of people, marginalized (Radd & Kramer, 2013). Without operating through critical consciousness, people at the SEA and LEA levels, especially those with dominant identity markers and beliefs, could be developing policies steeped in biases and assumptions. This lack

of critical consciousness continues to harm historically marginalized students and families. One way to ensure that equity approaches are also transformative is to center the voices of key school community stakeholders (e.g. parents/ caregivers, students, teachers, administrators) to be sure their ideas are incorporated into current and developing policy and practice (Great Lakes Equity Center, 2012, as cited in Sanborn et al. 2019).
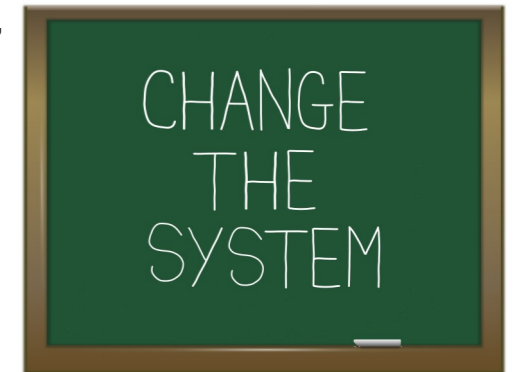
Implicit Bias

Implicit biases are involuntary, outside of an individuals' awareness or control (Blair, 2002 and Rudman, 2004, as cited in Staats & Patton, 2013). We all have implicit biases; however, it's when individuals' biases are encompassed in power and privilege, directly affecting the composition of policy and practice, that these biases become problematic (Sanborn et al., 2019).

An example includes school dress code policies that typically reflect white, conservative, and middle-class notions of professionalism (Sanborn et al., 2019). A recent example of how implicit biases contribute to the development of discriminatory policy in action occurred when a Black high school student was told that he had 90 seconds to cut his dreadlocks off—in the middle of a wrestling match—in order to avoid forfeiture. In this instance bias related to hair style and texture privileges hair texture mostly associated with white people, othering Black natural hair texture. Because the referee, a white man, possessed the power to transmit this bias into policy, he was able to pressure the Black high school student to sacrifice an aspect of his identity and body (hair), and in the moment deal with the humiliation of having to cut his hair in public in order to continue with the wrestling match.

For students who can't or won't conform to white, cisgender, middle class, non-disabled, male, Protestant norms, they are essentially punished (e.g. suspension, given detention, or as in the example, threatened with removal from extracurriculars) for not adhering to biased school policies (Sanborn et al., 2019). For educators who are pushed into enforcing these types of policies by people orchestrating the system, specifically if the policy falls outside of educators' beliefs and values, these policies can help create an inauthentic social justice environment (Sanborn et al., 2019). Ultimately, it's the students who remain oppressed, and often silenced, in the education system.

Moving Forward

From Technical Solutions to Context-Based Examination

So how do we ensure that there's an equity-focused change at the systems level? The people who are working in those systems must begin to focus on the critical and historical context of schooling and how it has impacted historically marginalized students—rather than focusing on standardized, technical, strategy-based approaches (Sanborn et al., 2019). To do this, please consider the following (adapted from Sanborn et al., 2019):

1. Create a multi-tiered process that critically looks at whose identities are being protected vs. whose are being marginalized. Consider the following (Sanborn et al., 2019, p. 4):

   - What are the values and assumptions behind educators' practices?

   - Who benefits and who is disadvantaged from policies and practices in place?

   - How can educators' do things differently to ensure more of their students and families benefit from practices in place?

2. Craft transformative policy rooted in authentic social justice and education equity:

   - Centering stakeholder voice

   - Analyzing policies and practices

   - Developing not only the willingness, but the ability to engage in transformative change towards equity

3. Consider the following to ensure educators diversify their approaches:

   - What inequities exist?

   - What is supporting these inequities, and what goals can begin to disrupt that support?

   - What will educators do to rectify existing inequity, toward social justice?

   - Is the action educators are taking accomplishing their equity focused goals?

4. Center the marginalized voices within the context, allowing space for their ideas and culture to be reflected in policy and practice.

5. Dive deep with equity work! Initiatives should push educators to examine their identities alongside their students' and families' cultures.

6. Accept that you may not be able to solve all problems—especially ones you don't understand. Be ok with learning as much as possible about yourself and the context first; this way, you can begin to truly understand for how long policies and practices have been positioning historically marginalized youth as inferior.

Summary

Through this newsletter, you've learned about the history of social justice education, the importance of people creating policy to attend to their own biases, and what you can do make sure change at the systems level is equity-focused. It's now up you to pass along this information, or, if you are the one who helps create policy, to consider heeding all you have read here. Please read the June Equity Dispatch Newsletter for more information.

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Meet the Authors

This June 2019 issue of Equity Digest was written and edited by: Robin G. Jackson, Erin K. Sanborn, and Seena M. Skelton

About the Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center

The mission of the Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center is to ensure equity in student access to and participation in high quality, research-based education by expanding states' and school systems' capacity to provide robust, effective opportunities to learn for all students, regardless of and responsive to race, sex, and national origin, and to reduce disparities in educational outcomes among and between groups. The Equity by Design briefs series is intended to provide vital background information and action steps to support educators and other equity advocates as they work to create positive educational environments for all children. For more information, visit http://www.greatlakesequity.org.

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Great Lakes Equity Center
902 West New York St.
Indianapolis, IN 46202
317-278-3493 - glec@iupui.edu
glec.education.iupui.edu