

FOREWORD: SILVER LINING IN THE MIDST OF THE PERFECT STORM

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As we conclude this summer in the midst of a health crisis, much has been happening globally. Notably, the COVID-19 is on everyone's mind and is at the forefront of social, political, and certainly educational institutions' agendas. Emotions run high, of course, since these are largely unprecedented times and uncharted territories which have led to a lot of floundering about the best approach to face these challenges.

In the midst of the ferocious Coronavirus sweeping so many lives daily, society seems to have been awakened by the other endemic virus of bigotry and racism that has, unfortunately, always been well and alive all around us. Despite benignly and often intentionally being ignored by many, this deeply rooted virus in society's DNA seems to have caught the attention of some by sporadic racial flares and cultural wars here and there. Thus, so many find themselves inevitably increasing their rhetoric in the name of social justice, cultural proficiency, and equity. On the other hand, there are those who chose silence as a convenient way to appease the status quo and those who are in power. Regardless, the racial tensions over the past few months, in the wake of the high-profile killings of people of color, coupled with the COVID-19 pandemic, a perfect storm has been formed in society's educational, social, economic, and political establishments.

Nonetheless, there seems to be a silver lining for all of this. The inequities that have plagued society for a long time have become more evident to even those who have long been in denial. Whether in healthcare or education, disparities of all sorts have been explicitly revealed by the symptoms of a larger and more detrimental cause that has never been effectively treated at its roots in the first place. Accordingly, social and educational institutions seem to have become numb and asymptomatic to the virus of institutional racism for a long time so much so that it has taken two viruses colliding to make society engage in soul searching.

There is still hope despite the foreboding that marks the next unknown phases of the storm. Among other promising phenomena, the societal discourse seems shifting, and educational and social institutions appear to be ready for an overhaul and restructuring. While there is no shortage of rhetoric and fiery talk, questions remain. In the meantime, as we continue to question and challenge the unquestionable, are the conversations intended to sooth or heal the wounds of racial injustice and repair the damage inflicted by racism and bigotry? Are we serious about implementing the initiatives and calls for change or these are intended to put a bandage on a gaping wound? Are we being reactive to the crisis or attempting to act in the face of the challenges? Are the conversations about would have been taboo topics on race or culture intended to console us or disrupt racism and inequities as they disrupt our lives?

Notwithstanding, actions are more needed than ever before if we truly need to move from rhetoric to reality (Suleiman, 2014a). Thus, we should move beyond our own comfort zone to take and make risks necessary for reforming schools (Suleiman, 2001, 2013). It begins with individuals confronting their unconscious biases and implicit underlying beliefs that shape their perspectives, behaviors and actions. When mindsets and attitudes change, actions may follow.

In schools, curriculum reform should involve de-construction and reconstruction in order to reflective inclusive affirmation of all of its consumers. It should be for, by, and about *all* participants regardless of their gender, race, ethnicity, status, language, culture, heritage, religion, nationality or any other factors. No ethnic or racial group should be highlighted at the expense of another even if it reveals that the liberators of today are the oppressors of the past or vice versa. As such, educational initiatives in curriculum should truly affirm the cultural, social, and historical being of those being denied voice and place in schools and society at large.

Meanwhile, we continue to tackle the root causes that plague our institutions and bring to

light the promise for desired change. The vision and mission of the Center for Leadership, Equity and Research (CLEAR) revolve around initiating courageous conversations, seeking equity and social justice, promoting cultural proficiency and competence, combating racism and bigotry, reducing cultural gaps and their negative side effects that include acknowledgement, ethnic, cultural, racial, gender, economic, academic, educational... opportunity gaps and other disparities that continue to plague institutions such as schools. With the *Journal for Leadership, Equity, and Research (JLER)*, we will continue to share voices loudly and clearly about the contemporary state of schools and their realities while providing implications and blueprints for social action to empower the marginalized groups and affirm their physical and intellectual being by cultivating their cultural assets, social capital, global perspectives, and civic roles.

In this regular edition of the *Journal for Leadership, Equity, and Research (JLER)*, readers will find a variety of articles that involve timely issues and topics that have a considerable place on education reform and empowering diverse student populations. One of the areas that continues to face educators involves working with special populations, English language learners and other diverse students. Despite the pronouncements in state and national standards, these student populations continue to fall between the cracks given the deficit models that fail to cultivate diverse students' assets by neglecting their rich cultural schemata, life experiences, and universal intelligence in pedagogical practices including curriculum, instruction and assessment.

Cho and Kraemer's article provides insight into the need for implementing responsive assessments when working with ELs and special populations. Their research underscores the need to examine biases in assessing the linguistically and culturally diverse. They rightly maintain that "evaluators, school psychologists, special education teachers, and psychometricians must strive" to conduct supportive assessment mechanisms that promote students' education and proper access in schools. In fact, assessment and evaluation ideally, "function best when they provide an account of the whole learner based on his or her abilities, talents, realities, needs, language, cultural, and personal experiences, assets, needs, funds of knowledge, and socioeconomic and social conditions" (Suleiman & Kunnath, 2020, p. 31).

Similarly, Feliz provides a nice account of how opportunity gaps in literacy can be reduced. She compiled a synthesis reviewing some of the literature suggesting "that traditional approaches to academic literacy instruction are inadequate for developing academic literacy in culturally and linguistically diverse students," while highlighting the cultural divide that negatively impacts achievement of minority students in schools. A model for equity in literacy practices is provided which has direct implications for providing culturally responsive practices that can enhance literacy development in all learners. For a long time, there has been a need for a paradigm shift towards asset-based and funds of knowledge approaches (see e.g. González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005) that are comprehensive and equitable and based on democratic principles. As pointed out elsewhere, Suleiman (2014b) and in Suleiman & Kunnath (2020) pointed out that such practices should transcend the goals of literacy skill building in students, but rather embrace promoting of skillful performance especially when working with linguistically and culturally diverse populations.

Louque and Sullivan's research uniquely contributes to our understanding of disparities facing African American students. Focusing on Black girls' experiences in schools, Louque and Sullivan aptly tackle the systemic inequities and racism in schools that shape the discipline practices and victimizes students of color in general. They maintain that "inequitable, exclusionary discipline practices occur because there are many forms of institutionalized racism, including the invisibility, intersectionality, and stereotyping of Black girls." As such, unfair and exclusionary discipline practices continue to victimize Black girls on racial grounds in a system that excludes rather than embraces them. This article has important implications for understanding how reactive zero tolerance policies are at odds with diverse students' social, emotional, and academic needs. The authors' findings echo the bulk of research evidence about inequitable discipline practices against Black male students and affirm the reactive nature of discipline approaches that are in essence considered *zero-patience* policies against students of color especially Black students.

Using a couple of scenarios to illustrate the issues at hand, Louque and Sullivan draw helpful implications for educators and administrators who seriously seek to achieve justice and equity in schools.

For education leaders to bring about desired change in schools, they should serve as social justice advocates and activists. This is the focus of McIntosh's article that illustrates how activism can be embraced by leaders as they seek to combat injustice and racism in schools. Deeply rooted in various theoretical frameworks about social justice and social movement theories, the purpose of McIntosh's article is "to bring to the forefront how social justice education leadership and social activism must be coupled as essential tools within the blueprint to end injustice." This underscores the need for active leadership in schools that are action-oriented and empowering. The paradigm shift towards Social Justice Activism is timely and necessary given the enormous efforts needed to change schools.

Since literacy transcends language and academic skill development, it includes a wide range of possibilities and outcomes. Needless to say, there are countless forms and definitions of literacy such cultural, ethnic, civic, geographical, mathematic, scientific, emotional, political, economic, digital, financial... and physical literacy among others. Bernstein and Lysniak's capitalize on the role of physical literacy in schools and argue "attaining physical skill can create social capital, ultimately a form of social justice, as individuals may use this foundation to be physically active throughout their lives." They cautioned against limiting students' physical activity as a form of injustice and urge educators to use "skill identity" as a lens to examine their practice and reduce inequities.

Readers of this edition will find a variety of contributions by authors sharing their expertise in certain domains based on the realities around us. Since "the pluralistic democratic society is to value the diversity that exists in all aspects of life in terms of equity and social justice, it is imperative that all participants are actively engaged towards a common goal," (Suleiman, 2014a, p. 2). Thus, like the previous and future editions of the JLER, the current collection of articles in this volume not only contributes to the existing body of literature in the field of equity, social justice and their related domains, but also enhances our engagement for the common vision and mission we are drafted to undertake.

Finally, on behalf of the JLER team, we are grateful to the contributors, reviewers, and everyone who assisted in the production of the edition.

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