

Lip Service to Action Planning: Why Education Leaders Should Conduct Equity Audits

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Abstract

The global pandemic has impacted all areas of education, and in its aftermath, a renewed commitment to issues of equity and justice has emerged. However, our divisive times have seen an increase in political rhetoric that challenges school leaders to defend culturally relevant practices that engage diverse learners. Leadership preparation programs remain pivotal in helping school leaders and school districts employ transformative leadership approaches and the need to explore new paradigmatic approaches to closing equity gaps has heightened. This paper examines how equity audit experiences can be offered by education leadership programs to effectively support their students in these politically tense times.

Key Words

equity, education leadership, education practice, social justice, diversity & inclusion

The aftermath of the global pandemic has fostered a renewed commitment to issues of equity and justice that impact all areas of education. While recent political rhetoric challenges school leaders to defend culturally relevant practices that engage diverse learners, the need to explore new paradigmatic approaches to closing equity gaps has heightened.

The closure of schools, the pivot to virtual learning, the learning loss of students, and an absence of social emotional learning strategies have all contributed to the exacerbation of inequities among minoritized student populations (Miller & Liu, 2021; Perry et al., 2021; Authors, 2022). This has prompted school leaders committed to inclusive learning spaces to incorporate transformative leadership strategies to ameliorate the various gaps that continue to plague public education (Furman, 2015; Shields, 2010).

Leadership preparation programs since the start of the pandemic have been pivotal in helping school leaders and school districts employ transformative leadership approaches to address the various equity challenges confronting diverse learners as well as the staff.

As a matter of fact, the Carnegie Project on Doctoral Education (CPED) reminds leadership preparation programs to incorporate critical theoretical perspectives and approaches that foster equity-minded schools and district leaders (Storey et al., 2014).

One such critical approach includes the implementation of equity audits. This paper examines how equity audit experiences can be offered by education leadership programs to effectively support their students in these politically tense times.

Commitments to “Equity Talk” Divorced from Action

Higher institutions today have embraced the values associated with equity and have formed a culture where “equity talk” is promoted. Evidence of this claim is readily accessible for anyone who previews the many University mission statements and marketing claims put forward by academia (Goodwin & Proctor, 2019). Freebody and Goodwin (2019) argue that failures to respect or recognize differences based on gender, ethnicity, race, sexuality, and religion have been met with demands for reshaping the rules, institutions, and practices that exclude, marginalize, or devalue particular identities, often involving deep cultural and symbolic changes.

Equity talk has become part and parcel of the policy vocabulary of university stakeholders who engage in the decision-making and positioning of higher education institutions (Goodwin & Proctor, 2019; Singh, 2010; Wilson-Strydom, 2015).

The recent rise of equity talk in universities is related to shifts in the cultures of universities and in wider society. For university administrators, equity talk seems to flow from the identity problems that arise from competing pressures to coherently define social purposes while achieving economic goals (Kenny, 2009; McArthur 2011).

For university instructors and researchers, equity talk may be perceived as expressing and renewing political orientations and aspirational virtues (Santiago et al., 2023; Wilson & Hendrix, 2022; Winter & O’Donohue, 2012). With the institutional culture embracing equity talk, espousing social justice values, and considering the rising political attention disparaging equity efforts (López et al., 2021), it may be opportune for

students to offer lip service to abstract equity morals without committing to equity action (Santiago et al., 2023; Wilson & Hendrix, 2022). Contemporary students may be more prone to have a negative reaction to equity talk or view social justice as the opportune lingo to learn in order to advance their careers.

University professionals who have traditionally been panned as being disconnected from practice (i.e. ivory towers) would be served by recognizing the shift in contemporary students, take notice of newer perceptions of equity talk, and seek strategies to better support social justice education leaders for tomorrow.

Our professional experience leads us to believe that critical theories without a strong emphasis on practical school improvement may hinder the student's development into an equity-minded leader by perceiving equity efforts as merely political language, or even more counter-productive, the student may perceive equity language as political proselytizing divorced from "real school" experiences.

Education leadership students can privately struggle with their commitment to equity while publicly espousing social justice values and talk with many students viewing equity as aspirational while internalizing the belief that the problems associated with equity are outside of their influence (Skrla, et al., 2009). Therefore, education leadership students need an academic experience that connects equity-talk to the work of bettering schools for their students.

Recently, Goodwin & Proctor (2019) suggested a focus on the "local, immediate, practical and personal" as a means of moving beyond social justice being a mere mantra in higher education and advancing socio-economic reform efforts (p.15). Students can receive valuable preparation to lead schools by

moving beyond the mere recognition of equity deficiencies towards carving pathways to advance equity goals.

Considering the recent efforts to politicize strategies that address equity disparities within schools, we propose an even greater emphasis on using critical theories to form action plans that clearly connect theory to practice while avoiding politically charged language.

Education leadership students can be made aware, and even experience, critical theories in practice improving schools while avoiding the misperception that equity talk within professional settings are an expression of political ideology or personal expression of aspirational virtues. We recommend facilitating an equity audit experience as part of education leadership curriculum to support students in an authentic engagement with social justice leadership and to effectively respond to the increasing suspicion of social causes of education communities.

An education equity audit within students' professional communities is a powerful means of facilitating a practical experience of critical theories in action is for students to conduct. One aim of leadership programs should be for students to experience how attention to equity improves student outcomes.

The current political climate provokes a response from education institutions to take measures to avoid students misperceiving social justice curriculum as a political agenda forced upon them. Being aware of this contemporary phenomenon of students suspecting higher education of forcing political ideology can better serve education leadership programs in supporting equity-minded leaders capable of leading schools.

Equity Audits: Practical Leadership Tools

Equity audits guide schools working toward social justice and excellence and is rooted on an impressive history of broader audits focused on civil rights and state accountability policy systems (Skrla et al. 2009) Equity audits have a deep and significant history in civil rights enforcement in the United States and other nations (i.e., Scotland, Great Britain, and Australia) and in a variety of arenas, including, but not limited to, education (Skrla et al. 2009). Corporations and governmental entities commonly conduct employment equity audits, health equity audits, pay equity audits, gender equity audits, and technology equity audits, among others (McKenzie & Skrla, 2016; Skrla et al. 2009).

Particularly, within the U.S. educational arena, equity audits have most commonly been conducted at the district level (either voluntarily or under pressure by civic activists or ordered by the U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights) as a way of determining the degree of compliance with a number of civil rights statutes that prohibit discrimination in educational programs and activities receiving federal funding (McKenzie & Skrla, 2016; Skrla et al. 2009).

We propose a different, more focused, more localized descendant of equity audits. What is needed, in our view, is a way for school leaders and stakeholders to obtain clear, understandable data illuminating the levels of equity and inequity within their schools and districts, which can subsequently be used to form action plans.

With ever increasing amounts of data being generated by state accountability systems, a major need emerges for tools that easily reduce the complexity of the data without stripping its utility (Jimerson, 2014). Equity audits can be tailored for school

communities and empower action towards equity and excellence at the school and district level (McKenzie & Skrla, 2016; Skrla et al., 2009).

Social justice literature has highlighted the trend of education practitioners avoiding the topic of equity (Authors, 2021; Lensmire, 2012).

Research has highlighted educators viewing struggling children of color and/or from low-income homes as a empathetic consequence of factors external to schooling; often blaming children's parents, their home lives, their communities, and even their genetics (McKenzie & Skrla 2016; Skrla, et al, 2009), with the result of educators deflecting responsibility for the inequitable achievement gaps within their schools.

Therefore, for teachers and administrators to have a more productive orientation, one that is not deficit-based or focused on issues external to schools, education leadership programs can support their students in recognizing that there are substantial and persistent patterns, assumptions, beliefs, practices, procedures, and policies at the school level that perpetuate inequity.

As we considered ways to improve our leadership program and to help connect leaders to issues of equity and access in diverse educational settings, we incorporated an education equity audit experience into our curriculum.

The students conduct their own equity audits within their professional communities with a manageable set of key indicators that together form a straightforward audit of equity developed by Skrla and colleagues (2009). This approach examines three key equity issues: teacher quality, programmatic equity, and achievement equity. The equity audit involves

five phases, including: (1) bringing together stakeholders; (2) collecting data and presenting it to the group; (3) openly discussing the data and the equity gaps that were revealed; (4) developing action plans; and (5) implementing action plans and monitoring results.

The equity audit experience serves as a modality of action research where students research, develop, and enact cycles of measurable action plans to address school problems. Action research has long been a cornerstone of EDD programs that empower practitioners with data driven approaches to measure school improvements (Alpert et al., 2023) and serves as a fitting modification to leadership programs.

By connecting equity problems to action research, we have found that this experience renders meaningful ramifications to our students and has supported their leadership development. We agree with Skrla et. al, (2009) when they note “the power of... equity audits are in the process itself—the process of making the choices about how to proceed, of gathering the data, of discussing the presentation of results, of grappling with the meaning of what is revealed by the audit and of planning (p. 25).

Many superintendents and school leaders who are equity minded are currently experiencing resistance from staff and stakeholders for a variety of reasons. One of these reasons is the increased suspicion of equity talk as a result of the polarities experienced within American communities and by perceived institutional virtue signaling disconnected with schooling (Lopez et al., 2021).

We encourage school leaders to be aware of these challenges and to remain committed to exploring pathways towards garnering support. Incorporating the strategy

of presenting equity initiatives as concrete, localized action plans to improve students’ educational experience may help in diffusing the growing suspicion of equity talk.

Conducting equity audits remains a focused means of collecting data to illuminate equity problems within schools and informing communities about the urgency to respond for the betterment of students. Redirecting politicized conversations back to improving student excellence is a simple, yet crucial strategy, in advancing equity causes within today’s schools.

Conclusion

Advancing social justice now faces new challenges in our times. The topic of social justice has been politicized and equity talk can be viewed with suspicion or as abstract virtue signaling divorced from schooling.

Those who support and train education leadership students are in danger of disconnecting from their students who enter into leadership programs influenced by the onslaughts of attacks on equity-minded leaders.

However, emphasizing student outcomes and underscoring improving schools for tomorrow can create pathways to better connecting with students in our politically charged times. Education leadership students can be supported to overcome challenges, move beyond the political discussion and individual identity constructions, and focus their leadership on improving schools by developing concrete action plans through education equity audits.

With the proper support of EDD programs, we assert that education equity audits can improve student outcomes within schools while promoting systemic equity. Systemic equity is required to close achievement gaps and to improve school

performance. According to Scott (2001), systemic equity transforms ways in which systems and individuals habitually operate to ensure that every learner, in whatever learning environment, has the greatest opportunity to learn while being enhanced by the resources and supports necessary to achieve competence, excellence, independence, responsibility, and self-sufficiency for school and for life. To

accomplish this systemic equity, leadership preparation programs, in our view, must develop programs that expose leaders to practical tools, like education equity audits. Programs walking students through the education equity audit process build equity-minded leaders focused on building better school communities while overcoming the challenges of these politically charged times.

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