



Keeping Equity in Focus

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PRINCIPAL EVALUATION CRITERIA

*Creating a Culture, Planning with Data. Improving Instruction, Engaging Communities,
Closing the Gap*

As a young, energetic high school teacher in the Spokane Valley, I focused on the students in my classroom.

I led conversations and promoted diversity and equity activities within my learning community. If students were not visiting elementary schools to promote cultural awareness, model sensitivity, and create connections, they were attending conferences about eliminating racism and promoting social justice. My passion for students and their experience of the world was well-placed, and at the end of each day, I was fulfilled and motivated with my work.

When I became a principal, I wondered if the change in career would limit my impact. As a teacher, conversations with students about acceptance, equality, and mutual respect offered me a sense of purpose. The principal position presented new opportunities, but the working conditions were different. As the leader, conversations are not just with students. Parents, staff, the community, and children are the daily stakeholders. Principals rarely have the structured opportunities teachers do for deep discussions about equity.

WHAT IS AN EQUITY LENS?

As a principal, bringing an equity lens to my daily work is key. Simply put, an equity lens allows us to seek and understand the disparities and disadvantages of segments of our population by diving deep into the data that matters. It is best described as the lens that emphasizes underserved students, Like out-of-school youth, English Language Learners, and students in some communities of color and some rural locations, with a particular focus on racial equity.¹ State Superintendent Reykdal echoes this importance, even saying in a 2017 press release that “every decision made at OSPI must have an equity lens to it.”

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An equity and empowerment lens leads us to think about issues in a new way; it can bring an idea into focus, or alternately, expand it outward and upward.² In this case, this lens does both. It allows us to focus on how equity and racial justice relate to a given issue and teaches us issues don't live in isolation. In fact, issues exist and are related to a much larger system of factors.

Clearly, this equity lens is one that is always in place. The commitment to racial equity is not something to check off a to-do list. Rather, it is a point of view that must be integrated with a mindful commitment to serve your school community.³

HOW DO YOU KEEP THE EQUITY LENS IN FOCUS? Transformational Leadership and Four Agreements for Courageous Conversations.

Our daily work as principals needs to be viewed continually through the equity lens. However, this cannot be a lens we pick and choose to wear, like a favorite pair of shades. Rather, the equity lens is the frame we hold up to the light every day to check ourselves and the effectiveness of our commitment to the students we serve.

As I think about applying this lens in my work, it is key to remember that for the equity lens to be sharp—and for me to demonstrate fidelity to its purpose—I must intentionally exercise the equity lens in all settings. Research on transformational leadership and courageous conversations give leaders two approaches to implement.

According to Riggio (2006), *Transformational Leadership* includes four significant tenets: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, individualized consideration and intellectual stimulation.⁴ I cannot think of a better way to model an equity lens in my daily work as a principal when it comes to conversations about race and equity. With this approach, leaders strengthen their perception of situations by applying these four areas. To use the four tenets of transformational leadership effectively with my equity lens, I must truly know my staff.

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In addition to transformational leadership, Singleton and Linton (2006) offer the strongest protocol and approach in their *The Four Agreements for Courageous Conversations*. This is key because it offers a self-regulating protocol in place for the challenging interactions with staff. The agreements also have four tenets: stay engaged, experience discomfort, speak your truth and expect and accept non-closure.

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SHARPEN YOUR LENS: KNOW YOUR RESOURCES

You can never have enough effective resources when keeping the lens sharp. It's not enough to watch an occasional webinar on race relations, attend a session on equity at a national conference, or even participate in a book study. Instead, you must be prepared to access and use resources at any given moment, and continually add to your toolbox.

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Remember, your first resource is your ability to self-reflect and ask tough questions about your own biases, fears, and assumptions of others, as well as questions about how to impact change. My personal questions include (and this is only a handful):

- How are my assumptions about a particular group keeping me from understanding this person's experience?
- Which conversations do I personally find uncomfortable, and how to I own that or do I avoid the conversation altogether?
- How can I help others (all stakeholders) apply an equity lens to our daily interactions and experiences as a learning community?
- How do I take conversations that matter beyond the monthly staff meeting, school assembly, or quick chat in the staff lounge?

- How might I promote diversity in an integrated fashion rather than recognizing it only during its token month (like Black History Month)?

And perhaps my most perplexing question and reflection:

“How do I continue to rally for the causes that matter—in both formal and informal settings—while maintaining influence in a learning community with many stakeholders and a social, cultural and political complexity that can be very different than the classroom?”

In addition to asking questions, it is critical to find resources to support your understanding of equity and offer suggestions for ways to create change. Taking time to seek support is critical. Resources are often a simple click away. Here are a few strong publications:

- teachingtolerance.org (also comes with a publication)
- www.edchange.org/multicultural/sites/journals.html
- <http://www.nea.org/tools/30402.htm>

Be sure to check out AWSP's own diversity and equity resources at www.awsp.org/diversityresources.

KEEPING AN EQUITY LENS IN CHECK: BE PART OF THE SOLUTION

Regardless of your familiarity with an equity lens approach, our students, staff and all stakeholders deserve for their leaders to embrace this lens. We must keep this lens in continual check. Put your equity lens on and see the world with hope. Remember, using an equity lens is not wearing rose-colored glasses. Rather, it means looking at the underbelly of some of our daily exchanges and the disparity and marginal nature of our students' experiences, and owning our role and responsibility in changing these experiences for them.

Brene Brown, author of several best sellers, including *Daring Greatly*, tweets it best when she shares,

“The fight for justice requires honest conversations about race & class privilege. Start owning it. Start healing it.”

As a teacher, conversations that mattered were at the heart of my daily instruction. As a principal, these conversations are part of my soul's work. The equity lens must be a permanent fixture in our routines, and wearing this lens a continual part of our professional and personal identity. ■

¹ Equity lens. Oregon-gov. Referenced in https://www.oregon.gov/HigherEd/Documents/HECC/Reports-and-Presentations/Presidents_Letter_Equity_Lens.pdf.

² Balajee, Sonali S., et al., (2012). Equity and Empowerment Lens (Racial Justice Focus). Portland, OR: Multnomah County.

³ Race Matters. Referenced in <http://www.racialequitytools.org/resourcefiles/morerace.pdf>

⁴ Bernard M. Bass & Ronald E. Riggio (2006). Transformational Leadership (2nd ed.). Erlbaum.

