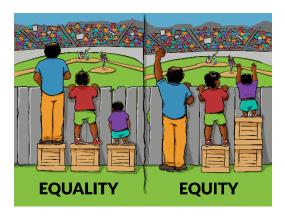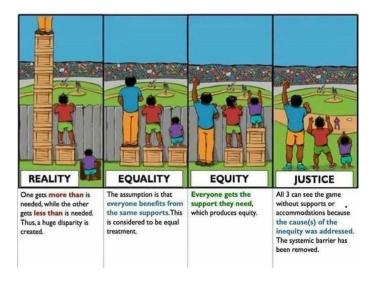# CASSA Conversation Starters: Leading for Equity

Many of us will have seen this, or other versions of an image meant to portray the differences between equity and equality. It is well known, and recent versions have moved beyond equity to include justice. In the first image, the demonstration is about how things are inadequate when we have a "one size fits all" system. Different students need different supports to access the same quality learning environments. Recent versions of the image have extended the illustration and have brought forth the issues of systemic barriers that exist to impede the learning for all children.

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Educational justice is defined many ways but, in its core, justice embraces racial equity and states that these are the conditions we achieve when a student's racial identity plays no role in their academic and social/emotional achievement. Working within finite public resources, policies and structures often have not changed substantially over the years and across Canada. Research consistently shows that systemic inequities within our educational systems still abound. Provinces have created reports and initiatives in an attempt to respond and to highlight the levels of inequity.

In 2017 Manitoba published a report highlighting systemic racism and calling on all divisions to engage in critical and courageous conversations about race and racism in education. The authors stated that while Indigenous and non-Indigenous groups experience racism in similar ways, through Colonialism and the Indian Act including the residential school system, Indigenous students face a "dual track" of racism that is "distinct among First Nations, Metis, and Inuit (FNMI) people."

Also in 2017, Saskatchewan began the initiative "Following their Voices" intending to build on the success of New Zealand's Te Kotahitanga. This was an initiative targeting teacher professional development and engaging teachers in a Critical Learning Cycle.

In British Columbia, a 2016 report by the Ministry of Education and the First Nations Education Steering Committee highlighted ongoing systemic racism and recommended that school districts need to self-assess their own status regarding racism. This launched a series of "Equity Scans" across the province, many of which are still in process today.

Towards Race Equity in Education (2017) reported that Black students, compared to other students, were twice as likely to drop out of school, were underrepresented in gifted programs, and over-represented in basic level programs in schools throughout Ontario.

A different story of Indigenous learning is told in Nova Scotia. The Mi'kmaq student graduation rate in Nova Scotia has traditionally been much higher than the Canadian average for Indigenous students. Through a sustained collaboration between universities and the Mi'kmaw Kina'matnewey, large numbers of Mi'kmaw speaking students have obtained their teaching credentials. Mi'kmaw communities have the right to manage their children's education and schools deliver language immersion courses, culturally appropriate pedagogy, and other strategies to promote student success.

What steps do we take, how to we assess our successes and challenges, and how do we begin a new narrative? A framework introduced by Khalifa, Gooden and Davis is useful to examine ways for systems to address systemic racism. They suggest four major strands of demonstrating culturally responsive school leadership. The strands are:

- Critical self-awareness;
- Culturally responsive curricula and educators;
- Developing and sustaining culturally responsive and inclusive environments; and

- Engaging parents, students and the community.

Another tool to use when unearthing current barriers that exist within our organizations is the Pratt Race Equity Continuum which is a way for systems to examine their own status based on the profile, culture and people within the organization. The continuum is a useful self-assessment tool with targeted language to shape how we all can work toward inclusive equitable and just systems.

Regardless of the tools you use, and the research that supports what we all experience in our systems, the path to educational justice likely begins within. Across Canada, we can continue to ask, when will what we know change what we do?

Table Questions:

1. What steps have you taken in your own professional learning to pursue critical self-awareness?
2. How have you worked, in your districts or schools, to develop culturally responsive and inclusive environments?
3. How have you engaged students and parents in conversations about barriers to equitable learning environments?

Further Resources:

BC Antiracism Research: Final Report. Directions. (2016, July 17th). https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/education/ways-to-learn/aboriginal-education/abed-antiracism-research.pdf

Following Their Voices. https://www.followingtheirvoices.ca/#/ftv/pages/6

Government of Manitoba (2017). Creating racism-free schools through critical/courageous conversations on race. https://www.edu.gov.mb.ca/k12/docs/support/racism_free/full_doc.pdf. Manitoba Education and Training. Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada.

James, C.E. & Turner, T. (2017). Towards Race Equity In Education: The Schooling of Black Students in the Greater Toronto Area. Toronto, Ontario, Canada: York University. https://edu.yorku.ca/files/2017/04/Towards-Race-Equity-in-Education-April-2017.pdf

Khalifa, M. Gooden, M. A. & Davis, J. E. Culturally Responsive School Leadership Framework. University of Minnesota. Organizational Leadership, Policy and Development. https://www.cehd.umn.edu/assets/docs/policy-breakfast/UMN-Culturally-Responsive-School-Leadership-Framework.pdf

Pratt Race Equity Continuum for Turning Commitment Into Measurable Results as of October 2017. https://www.pratt.org/ckeditor/userfiles/files/2017-1220%20Continuum%20.pdf

York University. UnLeading. Culturally Relevant and Anti-Racist Leadership. [Audio Podcast] https://www.yorku.ca/edu/unleading/podcast-episodes/culturally-responsive-anti-racist-leadership/

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