



Equity Traps: A Useful Construct for Preparing Principals to Lead Schools That are Successful With Racially Diverse Students

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Introduction

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Equity Traps – a Definition

Equity traps “are ways of thinking or assumptions that prevent educators from believing that their students of color can be successful learners.”

p601

Equity Traps

“These equity traps, as we are conceptualising them, are **patterns of thinking** and behaviour that trap the **possibilities** for creating equitable schools for children of color.” p603

“are both **individual** and **collective**, often reinforced among administrators and teachers through formal and informal communication, assumptions and beliefs.” p603

School Leadership and Equity Traps

If the cycle of equity traps is to be broken, “school leadership must first be able to understand what equity traps are and then be able to **recognize** or identify these traps in themselves and others and the ways they are **deployed** in the lived reality of schools.”

p604

The Research

- in-depth discussions with x8 experienced white teachers about their perceptions of their students of color.
- Each teacher had more than 3 years experience, some as much as 15-20 years.
- All teachers from the same school – an elementary school in a large urban US city where there is a major research university.
- The city has citizens of great wealth and substantial poverty.
- 95% of students from the school are from low-income families.
- Approx 56% students are African American, 40% are Latino, 3% are White and 1% are Native American.

Four Equity Traps

McKenzie and Scheurich identified four equity traps from their research:

1. A deficit view
2. Racial erasure
3. Avoidance and employment of the gaze
4. Paralogical beliefs and behaviours

Equity Trap 1: A Deficit View

- Valencia's (1997) work on deficit thinking: a theory that posits that the student who fails in school does so principally because of **internal deficits** or deficiencies.
- Main reason teachers gave for their students not being motivated to learn was they felt the students' parents did not value education.
- The teachers did not believe that school was the place where students developed a desire, a motivation, to learn; they felt the students needed to come to school **already motivated** to learn.
- Teachers repeatedly identified the students as having "**built-in**" **deficits** that the teachers could not be expected to overcome.

Strategies for Addressing Equity Trap 1

1. Neighbourhood walks: teachers visiting students' homes, hearing parents' concerns for their children – contradicted prior deficit thinking in showing that the parents cared about their children and valued education. Helped to forge a more authentic and equitable relationship between school and home.
2. Students and teachers gathering oral histories from the people in their communities. Bringing communities together through collecting and presenting stories.
3. Three-way conferencing. The student, family member/s and teacher each had responsibility to ensure that the student met his/her goals.
4. Teaching future leaders, through their university training, to develop strategies to eliminate deficit thinking.

Equity Trap 2: Racial Erasure

“the notion that by refusing to see color, by acting as if we can erase the race of those of color, and by prioritizing other factors – such as economics – over race, we can deny our own racism.”

Strategies for Addressing Equity Trap 2

1. Book study groups – teachers using books that expose the ways in which whites often view “racial others”. Restructure the typical weekly staff meeting into book study groups. Staff debriefings to explore topics related to changing the culture of the school.
2. Equity audits – “auditing” the school’s or district’s data for inequities by race. Educators need to focus on how schools are systematically producing inequities by race and how, in response educators can focus on race positively by dissolving these systematic inequities.

Equity Trap 3: Avoidance and Employment of the Gaze

- This idea of the gaze is taken directly from Foucault's (1977) work.
- The teachers from the study did not feel as though they were under the surveillance of parents and administrators in their low-income schools like they were at their middle-income schools.
- These teachers chose this low-income school to avoid the gaze or surveillance of parents, other teachers, and the administrators like they had experienced in their white middle-class schools: "I can slide here, where I couldn't slide on the west side".
- Also, because the teachers' behaviours were not being scrutinized, they could treat the students at East River in ways that would not have been tolerated at their former middle-income schools: "I have said things here that I would have never said over there... like "Get away from my desk, sit down and leave me alone.""

Strategies for Addressing Equity Trap 3

1. Hiring practices – hiring committees which are composed of school teaching and admin staff, parents and community members representative of the racial and economic makeup of the community; interview protocol.
2. Systems put in place so that the gaze is not employed to norm the behaviour of dissenters, especially those who advocate for the children. This can be done by establishing group norms that invite all voices to speak and by dignifying the voices of those who have a contradictory opinion (i.e., democratic learning communities).
3. Create a school that is thoroughly collaborative in which no one can hide destructive or deficit teacher beliefs or behaviours. This requires persistent focussed attention, e.g., deprivatisation of teachers' practice.

See: <http://kep.org.nz/resources>

Equity Trap 4: Paralogical Beliefs and Behaviours

- “it is false reasoning that involves self-deception” e.g. teachers in the study concluded that their negative behaviours (such as losing control, screaming at their students, being disrespectful) were caused by how their students treated them and each other.
- Involves “drawing a conclusion from a false premise.”

Equity Trap 4: Paralogical Beliefs and Behaviours

One teacher explained her behaviour:

“The anger of the kids has caused me (to act this way); I’ve gotten sucked into their anger. I mean I’ve never spoken to kids the way I have spoken to them this year. I mean it’s just, I am just this far out of control in my classroom on more days than I want anybody to repeat.”

Strategies for Addressing Equity Trap 4

1. Having teachers visit classrooms and schools where the teachers are being successful – providing a useful model and creating an understanding of how to create equitable classrooms.
2. Using master teachers or instructional coaches to promote or demonstrate success – modelling how teachers need to treat children.
3. Developing a critical mass of advocates for equity among the teachers – principals alone cannot make systemic change – they need advocates.

Conclusions

“Arguably, the best route to influence current teachers is through the principal, who, research repeatedly shows, is the key to school change.”

“...the principal must be able to identify and understand barriers to equity or, what we have called here, equity traps”