Tangible Equity Tools that Transform School Culture

Learning Forward
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www.BelongingThroughDignity.com
The Dysfunctional Cycle of Equity Work

Within this cautionary tale...

- Where do you see your school or district?

- What red flags do you see?

Source: Belonging through a Culture of Dignity (2019) by Cobb & Krownapple
There is More to Me Than What You See

When people look at me, I believe they see...

But when people really know me...

This is important to me because...
The IncludED Matrix

Integrated

High Access

Included

Conditional Belonging

Access Low

Excluded

Unconditional Belonging

Segregated

Belonging Notes

Source: Belonging through a Culture of Dignity (2019)
by Floyd Cobb & John Krownapple, p. 44, 51, 54
Adapted from Abraham Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs
Dignity Notes

• Dignity is our *inherent value and worth* as human beings. Everyone is born with it.
• Dignity is an *internal state* of peace that comes with the recognition and acceptance of the value and *vulnerability* of all living things.

Source: *Leading with Dignity (2018)* by Donna Hicks
The Dignity Framework for Educational Equity

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The Dignity Framework for Educational Equity

Dr. Floyd Cobb and John Krownapple

The Dignity Framework for Educational Equity offers schools a new way to approach educational equity. We’ve given that “new way” a name: Dignity. If that word sounds faintly old-fashioned to your ears, that’s because it is. Since the beginning of the 19th century, its use in popular culture has fallen off dramatically. Dignity is a noun with roots in Latin: “dignus” meaning “worthy.” We’re using that word to communicate the innate, equal worth of each human being simply because he or she is human. It is our common heritage and birthright as members of the human family. Even though we are born with it, we aren’t born with an understanding of how to recognize, reclaim, and extend it to others. That is our work.

Dignity transcends differences; everyone is born with it and holds it to the same degree. According to common definitions, dignity is the state or quality of being worthy. We propose that dignity is the central point of all equity work; it is the lens through which each arm of the work comes into clear focus. It answers the question, why. Why are we doing this work? On what foundation are we building? The foundation and reason for all equity work is the dignity of the basic humanity of each and every person we work with, even those who we may label “difficult.” Thus, we all have the right to treat ourselves and be treated with dignity.

The Dignity Principle

Common approaches to equity work often frame dignity as the goal toward which we are striving. However, in our experience, although that approach is well-intentioned, it puts the cart before the horse. Dignity comes first. The reason is obvious when you think about it. We are human beings with the dignity of the human spirit first. All the rest is built upon that reality. That’s why our Dignity Framework turns the previous approach inside-out. We build upon dignity to reach the goal of equity.

We’re turning dignity into a verb. This is how we can “do” dignity. This is how we can move from an idea into an action. This is what dignity can look like in action. We’re offering a “language of dignity” in order to move from abstractions into actions -- actions that will address inequity and exclusion in our schools. Our “doing dignity” framework has four components, each of which works to make concrete the ideal contained in the noun dignity. These components are four focused ways through which we can extend dignity outwards to honor the dignity of others through values, beliefs, behaviors, practices, and policies. If this seems radical or overly idealist, that might be because we have been born into a warped system where, for the most part, dignity violations are more normal than dignity honored. Each component offers utility value to educators committed to democracy by ensuring a high-quality education for each and every student. With the help of this framework, we can shape cultures of dignity that ensure every person is included.

We need to keep an important point in mind when we talk about dignity. Dictionaries define it as “the state of being worthy of honor and respect.” We need to be careful not to mix up nor conflate “dignity,” “honor,” and “respect.” In common usage, these words may seem synonymous. That’s fine, but for our work, they are different. We honor by recognizing, regarding, and commending the reality of the equal dignity/worth of each human. Dignity is innate in the person. It just is. It is universal and fixed. We honor that innateness. All persons have dignity as human beings because they are human beings. Respect is different and distinct. Whereas dignity is unconditional, respect is conditional. Respect
is a kind of admiration that needs to be earned by behavior. Respect is an accomplishment. It is relative and flexible. It can be earned and it can be lost. Dignity, on the other hand, cannot be lost, although it can be violated by others, by our culture, or even by ourselves. To put it simply, dignity belongs to the person; respect may or may not be accorded to that person’s actions. That’s an important distinction. It’s crucial for the success of our work that we fully understand this concept and move into a place of seeing dignity as a moral imperative.

**Putting Dignity into Practice**

As we unpack the concept of dignity and do this work, we will find -- perhaps to our surprise -- that in order to extend dignity to others, we first must have a firm grasp on our own dignity. That’s because there is a common bond to human dignity. It is our shared identity. We first need to “do dignity” with ourselves because we cannot give to others what we ourselves lack. Once we have a firm grasp on our own dignity, we can extend it the people around us. We can institutionalize it in school practices and policies. Our Dignity Framework and its four components give us the requisite tools to do this absolutely essential work.

1. **Dispositions for Dignity:** Four personal capabilities and organizational capacities that, if nurtured, make it easier to honor dignity.
   - Listening
   - Empathy
   - Patience
   - Openness

2. **Indicators of Belonging:** Four states of being that describe the quality of people’s present experience that can be used to gauge and assess the degree to which dignity is honored.
   - Appreciated
   - Validated
   - Accepted
   - Treated Fairly

3. **Dignity Distorters:** Elements that hinder our ability to honor dignity. Since “dignity begins with me,” we first uncover and correct the warped perceptions we have of our own self-worth before we can fully extend dignity to others. When we jettison these distorters, we can bring dignity into clear focus.
   - **Incapacities:** judgement, apathy, intolerance, denial
   - **Violations:** degrading differences, presuming incompetence, blaming and shaming, dominating
   - **Indicators of Othering:** mistreated, othered, dismissed, marginalized

4. **Standards for Dignity:** Four behavioral standards for planning, implementing, and assessing inclusive and equitable behaviors, practices, and policies.
   - Build partnerships and community
   - Repair harm and restore relationships
   - Affirm differences and uniqueness
   - Presume competence and positive intent


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Reflection

Here’s what.
(I’m learning…)

So what?
(It’s important because…)

Now what?
(As a result of my experience, I will…)

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