

TRANSFORMATIONAL PEDAGOGY: CASHING THE PROMISSORY NOTE OF EQUITY FOR ALL STUDENTS – ESPECIALLY THOSE WHO ARE MARGINALIZED

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What makes equity so hard to achieve are its many facets, so numerous and complex they are hard to define. This inability to define equity handily is especially confounding for urban districts that reach out to our organization, the National Urban Alliance for Effective Education (NUA), for help in translating their commitment to “equity” into practices to stem the tide of unnecessary underperformance plaguing their schools. These districts are predominantly in cities where “urban” is a euphemism for “low-performing” students of color and their teachers (Jackson, 2011, p.1).

Martin Luther King understood the difficulty in defining complex concepts such as equity, so he employed metaphors to help people decipher and grasp the concept. In this context, equity is the promissory note he spoke about in his I Have A Dream speech: equity for all people to be free to pursue a life of happiness. In both the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, this right to the pursuit of happiness was based on belief in the potential of Americans (at that time specifically male, land-owning Americans of European descent) to develop strengths and abilities for self-actualization. These strengths and abilities were valued for their currency ... for their worth in contributing to a developing society.

When people are valued for their potential, tools and opportunities are expressly created to mine for that potential and to eradicate hindrances. In education, believing in and valuing the innate potential of students is apparent in a school district’s written vision and policies for students. These articulate and support an image similar to the one posed by Paulo Freire: students being engaged and supported to be self-actualizing so they can transform themselves to both thrive in as well as transform the world (Freire, 1970).

Neuroscience has demonstrated that all brains are predisposed for high intellectual performances and the imperative for self-actualization, yet in urban districts around the country, Freire’s vision is still not applied to students of color. “Potential,” “thriving,” “flourishing” and “self-actualization” are actively absent from the lexicon of vision statements for urban schools. Without a district vision statement that clearly articulates genuine belief in the currency of the potential of students of color, equitable practices are hard to put in place. Staff is not inspired to believe in the potential of their students and is therefore unmotivated to search for, or even envision, possibilities for practices and opportunities that would surface the potential of these students (Jackson and McDermott, 2012). Students’ innate potential remains elusive, unidentified and uncultivated. With this loss of potential, student engagement and achievement degenerate in response to low-level repetitive tasks, which stifles motivation and results in underperformance.

Osta and Perrow have provided a catalyst for a transformational vision to build deepened understanding of equity.

They explicate equity as having three salient dimensions:

- 1. Removing the predictability of academic success or failure based on social, economic or cultural factors;**
- 2. Interrupting inequitable practices, eliminating biases and oppression and creating inclusive school environments for adults and children;**
- 3. And discovering and cultivating the unique gifts, talents and interests that each human being possesses (Osta and Perrow, 2008, pp. 3-4).**

The transformative part in this definition is the third element, yet this is the one that is rarely utilized to guide vision statements or equity efforts. For us, if discovering and cultivating the unique gifts, talents and interests of students of color and other marginalized students fueled a district’s vision and its resulting policies and practices, then predictability of academic success or failure based on social, economic or cultural factors would be removed and inequitable practices interrupted, eliminating biases and oppression.