



## **Equity by Design:**

### Avoiding the Traps: Identifying and Disrupting Six Paradoxical Habits of Equity Leadership

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# Avoiding the Traps: Identifying and Disrupting Six Paradoxical Habits of Equity Leadership

As public awareness of “the achievement gap”<sup>1</sup> grew as a result of No Child Left Behind, the call to create more equitable schools has become more common across the country (See, for example, Keenan [in Singleton, 2015]; St. Paul Public Schools, 2018). We may ask, “Why is it that gaping disparities continue, almost unabated, despite decades of efforts of school reform?” and, “What can we do to fix the problem?”

Truly, responses to these questions are as numbered and far-ranging as there are schools in the country. Importantly, as we seek to answer these questions, critical scholars like myself employ a particular lens focused on power and privilege. Although we certainly consider outcome data as a sign of inequity and inequality, we dig deeper to discern patterns in how power and privilege are used to persistently benefit some while disadvantaging others. In relation to inequality in schools, we see that it occurs according to socially constructed, but nonetheless real and important socio-cultural identities such as race, gender, dis/ability, religion, first language, etc. One line of understanding that has emerged from these analyses has been to identify patterns in educator thoughts and actions that are well-

intended, but in reality further entrench inequities (Radd & Grosland, 2016).

McKenzie and Scheurich (2004) documented one set of such patterns that they termed “equity traps,” which they define as:

...patterns of thinking and behaviors that trap the possibilities for creating equitable schools for children of color. In other words, they trap equity; they stop or hinder our ability to move toward equity in schooling. Furthermore, these traps are both individual and collective, often reinforced among administrators and teachers through formal and information communication, assumptions, and beliefs. (p. 603)

These equity traps include: a deficit view; racial erasure; avoiding and employing the gaze; paralogical beliefs and behaviors; and organizational constraints (Schoener & McKenzie, 2016; Skrla, McKenzie, & Scheurich, 2009). Similarly, Shields (2004) identified deficit or pathologizing views, racial and cultural erasure, and the strength of the status quo (i.e., educator habitus) as educator mindsets that prevent our ability to increase equity in schools.

<sup>1</sup> The use of quotation marks around “the achievement gap” is intended to signal the problematic nature of this term. Rather than thinking of it as “a persistent disparity of educational measures between groups of students defined by race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status (SES) and gender (Hidden Curriculum, 2014)” we recognize “it as the outcome of historical and intergenerational marginalization of students of Color and students living in disinvested communities” (Coomer, Jackson, Kyser, Skelton, & Thorius, 2017, abstract). In practice, “achievement gap” framing leads to beliefs and practices that seek to remediate students and their families. In contrast, terms like “the education debt” (Ladson-Billings, 2006) or “resource inequities” direct attention toward historic and systemic inequality and marginalization. For further information, see Coomer, Jackson, Kyser, Skelton & Thorius, 2017 at [https://greatlakesequity.org/sites/default/files/20170104356\\_newsletter.pdf](https://greatlakesequity.org/sites/default/files/20170104356_newsletter.pdf).

Building on earlier research, this brief describes and provides examples of six practices that are common in equity leadership, yet ultimately re-entrench systemic inequities; I call these “paradoxical habits.” I use the term habits because they are repetitive and mostly happen without conscious thought. These habits are *paradoxical* because they are self-contradictory; in other words, while they are usually well-intended for the purpose of addressing equity, they instead have the opposite effect, and actually strengthen inequitable systems and thinking. In this brief, I describe each habit. Then, I lay out key questions as a means for the reader to practice critical consciousness (Radd & Kramer, 2014) and disrupt these habits in their own practice, and in their organizations.

## Six Paradoxical Habits that Re-Entrench Educational Inequity

This brief focuses on six paradoxical habits, named such because while they are intended to disrupt inequitable practices, they actually re-entrench inequity. These six paradoxical habits include selective racialization, desirabilizing whiteness, burdening the protected, leading technically, centralized compliance and control, and excusing institutional failures. These habits were first identified via a process of policy analysis that sought to identify the ways in which policy language directed change in practice (see Radd & Grosland, 2016; Radd, Grosland, & Steepleton, 2019). These habits are common in schools, even those that are focused on equity. In this section, I define, describe and provide examples to illustrate each of the six habits.

### Selective Racialization

The term *selective racialization* is important to understand when talking about equity. Racialization occurs when one person, or a group of people, label the race of another person, or a group of people (Gonzalez-Sobrino & Goss, 2018; McCarthy, Crichtlow, Dimitriadis, & Dolby, 2005). *Selective racialization* is used

here to refer to the way that some people are thought of as having a race, and others are not (see, for example, McCarthy, Crichtlow, Dimitriadis, & Dolby, 2005). Specifically, it occurs when people in power or people with privilege identify only *some* people racially, while not doing so universally (Radd, Grosland & Steepleton, 2019). For example, the term “people of Color” is a catch-all phrase that refers to anyone who has been racialized. At the same time people in power and/or with privilege tend to de-racialize those they see or think of as white, meaning they are seen or thought of as *not* having a race (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001).

The practice of racialization is a by-product of race as a social construction (Omi & Winant, 2006; Parker & Lynn, 2002). Remember, race has no biological basis (McChesney, 2015; Smedley & Smedley, 2005); in other words, there are no scientific, chemical, or genetic means of identifying a person’s race. Instead, race was an artificial construct created to sort people in to different categories, specifically for



the purpose of granting some people rights and privileges and excluding other people from those same rights and privileges (Smedley & Smedley, 2005). For example, race was used in the Northeastern United States in the 1600s to distinguish between indentured servants who

would eventually gain full citizenship in exchange for their labor, and those who were enslaved and thus considered property—without rights and the future potential for freedom (Facing History and Ourselves, 2019).



Because race is a social construction, understanding the impact of racialization is complicated for a few reasons. First, there is a false notion that it is possible and desirable to treat everyone the same, without regard for their race. This is a false notion because many scientific studies have shown that, in the United States at least, we all see race immediately and persistently (Bennett & Sani, 2003; Kurzban, Topoby & Cosmides, 2001; Shutts, 2015; Winkler, 2009). In other words, though race is a social construction, it is a living and active part of our daily experiences.

Next, as a social construction, race is actively used to grant some people (those who are seen as white) rights and privileges while marginalizing or excluding others (those who are identified as “of Color”) from those same rights and privileges (Smedley & Smedley, 2005). In fact, race has fairly profound material, functional, structural, social, political, and economic consequences. Put simply, *race matters!*

However, as part of the social construction of race, the majority of white people think of themselves as not having a race (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Dyer, 2001). This is problematic because it contributes to the false belief that white is “normal” and anything else is “different” or “other”. You hear this when someone says, “he’s a different race” or “she’s a diverse candidate”. Those statements are selective racialization, in that they identify the person as having a race, in contrast to a white person, whose race is implied to be “normal” or “neutral”.

In sum, selective racialization fortifies the idea that white is normal and other races are “different” or “other” (Radd, Grosland, & Steepleton, 2019). This strengthens the centrality and power of whiteness, a problem we turn to next.

### ***Desirabilizing Whiteness***

The practice of *desirabilizing whiteness* (DW) (Radd & Grosland, 2016, 2018) goes hand-in-hand with *selective racialization*. In DW, the experience, property, place, and status of white people is positioned as the desired state. In schools,

The action through which DW often manifests is to grant access for racialized peoples to predominantly white domains and in modern times, stems from a benevolent intent. Examples of DW at play include desegregation policies that act to place students of Color in predominantly white environments; efforts to move students of Color in to “Gifted and Talented” courses; education reform models that are based upon “highly successful” schools or practices; and the standards movement that holds a white-constructed minimum standard for

performance on standardized tests.  
(Radd & Grosland, 2018, p. 3)

DW upholds racism specifically because it maintains officially sanctioned sorting systems that were constructed based on white norms, and the myth of meritocracy (Bowles & Gintis, 2002).

### **Burdening the Protected**

*Burdening the protected* occurs when school administrators, policy makers, and other professionals think of minoritized and racialized individuals and groups in a deficit manner, seeing them as deficient or lacking while simultaneously burdening them to fix the circumstances and systems of inequality (Radd & Grosland, 2018). “Protected” is a legal term; it mandates that the people who hold identities that are routinely and historically subject to discrimination are *protected* from any discrimination based upon that identity (National Archives, 2019). Unfortunately, the term tends to create a mental model of the people who hold such identities among those who do not hold those identities. Rather than focusing attention on the act of discrimination targeted toward a specific aspect of a person’s identity, it shifts the gaze of attention to the individual. It can create a sense of the person as deficient, incapable, or vulnerable, suggesting that the *person* is in need of protection and does not have agency (Radd, Grosland & Steepleton, 2019). The effect can be that others—those not with protected identities—can assume a paternalistic role toward those with protected identities, taking over decision-making and other forms of authority that are otherwise assumed to be the right of competent individuals.

Simultaneously, these protected individuals become unfairly burdened. For example, a person who uses a mobility aid such as a wheelchair, walker, or cane is supposed to be protected from any discrimination that relates to

that aspect of their personhood. Commonly, however, they are burdened to find and use the one accessible entrance to a large building, their entrance thus requiring far greater time and effort than a person who travels strictly using their feet and legs.

Similarly, although school desegregation efforts occur for a variety of purposes, one primary purpose has been to increase and bring equality to the (amount of) resources distributed to minoritized and racialized communities. However, often school desegregation efforts require that minoritized and racialized persons leave their communities and travel great distances to go to a more generously resourced school, rather than providing full and equal or equitable resources to all schools, and allowing children to attend school near their families and support systems. In this case, the stated beneficiaries of this plan are required to do more than those other students/families who already have more in order to access those resources or benefits (see for example, Ford, 2014).



### **Leading Technically**

The term *leading technically* refers to an approach to leadership that focuses on actions and technical solutions (Radd & Grosland, 2016;



Kozleski & Huber, 2010). This approach suggests that technical solutions and a preference for action are the solution to deeper systemic issues that are grounded in inequitable and problematic mental models and frames of reference (Radd & Grosland, 2016). The standardized testing movement is an example of leading technically, in that it was built on the idea that testing students regularly would result in higher test scores reflecting improved reading skills.

The standardized testing movement led to many other instances of leading technically. For example, in an effort to raise test scores, many school districts have invested in new reading curricula and sponsored the corollary professional learning sessions for all of their teachers (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Unfortunately, these curricula and trainings do not address the presence of deficit narratives, mental models, and ethnocentrism within the school (Keeter, 2017; Lomax, West, Harmon, & Viator, 1995). On the surface, these curricula are intended to provide teachers with a new, more skilled approach, suggesting it is the technical approach to teaching reading that is at issue. In other words, these curricula imply it is teacher skill that is needed to improve reading skills in children.

Notably, these curricula are almost always introduced in schools where there are greater proportions of racialized students and students living in poverty (Darling-Hammond, 2010; McNeil, 2000; Milner, 2013), suggesting that the curricula are for “those children”—those children who need special help or special strategies. Ultimately, this places blame for broader systemic issues and deeper frames of

reference on to the children who they marginalize.

### **Centralized Control Requiring Compliance**

The practice of *centralized control requiring compliance* is a close companion to *leading technically*. This practice suggests that school leaders in a central office can mandate specific practices and approaches that will adequately address inequity (Radd, Grosland & Steepleton, 2019). For example, when faced with data that reveals highly disproportionate rates of school discipline and suspension (see Losen & Martinez, 2013), a superintendent may declare that the district will no longer suspend students, and that each school will be required to submit their discipline data to the superintendents’ office for review<sup>2</sup>. Though reducing disproportionality in school discipline is a clear move toward equity, simply demanding or reporting it will not shift this practice; instead, systemic approaches are needed (Sullivan, Weeks, Kulkarni & Goerdt, 2018).

Similarly, the standardized testing movement is also an example of centralized control requiring compliance. Again, this movement mandated that districts engage in ongoing testing of their students, and then report their scores to a centralized authority, often a state department of education (US Department of Education, 2019). The idea here was that if schools were “accountable” to the state and parents, then this would raise test scores. This approach has largely been found to reduce learning (Koretz, 2017).

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<sup>2</sup> See for example, District of Columbia Public Schools (<https://wamu.org/story/17/11/21/bill-eliminate-school-suspensions-d-c-students-except-extreme-cases/>); Detroit Public Schools (<https://wamu.org/story/17/11/21/bill-eliminate-school-suspensions-d-c-students-except-extreme-cases/>); Denver Public Schools (<https://www.chalkbeat.org/posts/co/2017/03/15/denver-public-schools-takes-strong-stand-against-suspension-and-expulsion-in-early-grades/>).

## **Excusing Institutional Failures**

*Excusing institutional failures* occurs when school personnel identify important and reasonable equity goals, but then fall short of achieving these (Radd & Grosland, 2016). Then, they throw up their hands and say, “it just can’t be done” rather than finding the means to achieve their goals. When this happens, marginalized and minoritized students continue to be underserved and experience barriers to their achievement and inclusion.

We see this often when schools aim to hire a more racially diverse teaching staff, and then continue to hire a predominantly white female teaching staff, while persons of Color are relegated to lower positions (Bolser, 2011). The mantra of “there just aren’t enough qualified candidates” excuses the failure of school administrators and hiring committees to make different choices (see, for example, Stover, 2018).

In order to disrupt these habits, we first need to recognize when they are occurring, or better, when they have the potential to occur to divert our efforts towards more effective, equitable practices.

Similarly, when school personnel place racialized students into special education classrooms, or when they discipline or fail to graduate them at disproportionate rates, it is common for them to blame students and their families rather consider systemic causes of ongoing disproportionality (Jackson, Thorius, & Kyser, 2016).

### **On the Lookout: Disrupting the Habits**

These six habits are what we call “paradoxical,” meaning that they are intended to eliminate inequity while they actually fortify it. In order to disrupt these habits, we first need to recognize

when they are occurring, or better, when they have the potential to occur to divert our efforts towards more effective, equitable practices. In order to do so, we call on the practice of critical consciousness to disrupt these habits. Critical consciousness is defined as “the willingness and ability to see how power and privilege are at work to systematically advantage some while simultaneously disadvantaging others” (Radd & Kramer, 2016). It is “an active and persistent state of awareness that consistently seeks to unearth the taken-for-granted, and examine it for the ways that it masks institutionalized inequality, privilege, and oppression” (Radd & Kramer, 2016; Radd & Macey, 2014).

The six paradoxical habits provide us with tangible and actionable means to practice critical consciousness. Educators and other leaders can actively look for these habits in motion, then act to disrupt them and create new, more equitable and effective habits. For examples of questions the critically conscious person can ask when designing a plan, making a decision, or observing a practice in real time, please see the Appendix.

### **Conclusion**

Most school personnel throughout the country are aware, on some level, of the ongoing and damaging impact of disparate outcomes (Keenan, in Singleton, 2015; St. Paul Public Schools, 2018). Many schools and districts have placed considerable effort and time into actions and plans intended to create greater equity. Still, despite decades of reform, persistent inequities continue (Guinier, 2004; Hatfield, Cassidy & Faldowski, 2015; Magan, 2017; Verges, 2015).

The six paradoxical habits presented in this brief are present in schools throughout the country. While intended to disrupt inequity and bring greater opportunity and equality for all students,

they actually serve to fortify current systems that marginalize and exclude those students and their families who have been historically underserved.

## Appendix

Paradoxical Habit to Avoid	Questions Used to Identify Habits
Selective Racialization	Who is identified by race? Who isn't? What other words are used rather than racial identification ("urban," "poor," "good," "bad")? What are the patterns here? What are the advantages and disadvantages of identifying people in this way? For those identified racially, in what way does it advance equity? In what way might it hinder equity?
Desirabilizing Whiteness	Where is whiteness implied but not named? In what ways does the plan/decision center whiteness rather than disrupt current systems and distributions of power? In what ways is a solution posed that puts racialized individuals or communities into proximity with white people, rather than redistribute resources and power? In what ways are assets and abilities of marginalized communities overlooked, undervalued, or ignored?
Burdening the Protected	In what ways might the plan/decision reduce the ability of some people to access their right to self-determination? In what way does the plan/decision require those who have been marginalized to take extra steps, or make extra efforts, to access more equitable circumstances and opportunities?
Leading Technically	To what degree is the plan/decision/action focused on technical action? Explain how the actions you take will create changes in the system. What assumptions are contained in your explanation, and are they plausible? What credible evidence suggests that the overall plan of action will result in the outcome you desire?
Centralized Control Demanding Compliance	To what degree was your plan devised with the people it will most effect v. in a centralized team away from the people it will effect? To what degree does your plan demand compliance and accountability, rather than change?
Excusing Institutional Failures	In what ways do you feel the outcomes are beyond your control? In what ways do you blame the problems of inequity on the people who are most negatively affected by it?

## About the Author

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## About the Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center

The mission of the Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center is to ensure equity in student access to and participation in high quality, research-based education by expanding states' and school systems' capacity to provide robust, effective opportunities to learn for all students, regardless of and responsive to race, sex, and national origin, and to reduce disparities in educational outcomes among and between groups. The Equity by Design briefs series is intended to provide vital background information and action steps to support educators and other equity advocates as they work to create positive educational environments for all children. For more information, visit <http://www.greatlakesequity.org>.

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