The Complexities of Equity

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Navigating Shades of Gray in Schools and Organizations

Latish C. Reed

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Preface

Navigating Shifting Election Outcomes and Their Impact

November 4, 2008—President Barack H. Obama was elected.

November 6, 2012—President Barack H. Obama was reelected.

November 8, 2016—President Donald J. Trump was elected.

November 3, 2020—President Joseph R. Biden was elected.

November 5, 2024—President Donald J. Trump was reelected.

As a layperson, I have always been fascinated by politics. My high school social studies teacher, Sonja Ivanovich, inspired me to become a middle school social studies teacher. In her class, she required that we analyze current events and political implications in newspaper and Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) television content. I learned that shifts in political power can have significant social, economic, cultural, legal, judicial, and environmental impacts in the United States and worldwide. The sixteen-year span of the five election cycles outlined above illustrates a ping-pong in political ideologies that impacts efforts to curate more equity in the US. Free and fair elections are one of the cornerstones of our democracy. Fortunately, or unfortunately, election results determine how equitable actions can be enacted or whether they can be enacted at all. Large-scale policy shifts impact equitable outcomes. These five election cycles have unearthed polarizing differences within the electorate that will continue to impact equity work and how it is advocated for in the future. These swings provide the backdrop for *The Complexities of Equity: Navigating Shades of Gray in Schools and Other Organizations*.

When Barack Obama was elected the first African American president, it seemed to be a strong signal that the US was ready to turn the page on its history marred by its enslavement of Black Americans. Some, like David Schorr of National Public Radio, claimed this symbolized a postracial society

(Schorr, 2008). At the time, he wrote, "The post-racial era, as embodied by Obama, is the era where civil rights veterans of the past century are consigned to history and Americans begin to make race-free judgments on who should lead them." Obama's historical election showed that white Americans would vote for and elect a Black man—a clear sign of racism's death or so he suggested.

However, following Obama's election, a bold new conservative faction of the Republican Party emerged that opposed the economic stimulus package following the 2008 financial recession. Its opposition was parallel to a rise in racialized rhetoric against Obama's presidency (Willer, Feinberg, & Wetts, 2016). The Tea Party moved from a grassroots protest group to an organization capable of winning seats in Congress within a year and a half of its inception. Willer et al. (2016) explain how Obama's election seemed to garner attention to the perceived social footing lost by white America because of the election of a Black man. Michael Dimock (2017) of the Pew Institute provided some evidence to substantiate that assertion. According to his prediction, "In less than 40 years, the U.S. will not have a single racial or ethnic majority group." Forecasts like this seemed to stoke fears among white voters, building a steady opposition to the changing tide in the US.

Throughout the Obama years, dissatisfaction among Tea Party members and their supporters grew because Obama's leadership provided equitable initiatives in several areas. The Tea Party and its supporters began to feel that their values were being threatened and their resources were being redistributed, diminishing their status. For example, the Affordable Healthcare Act (ACA) (Obamacare) became one of the most contentious but equitable accomplishments of his presidency. The ACA covered millions of previously uninsured Americans (Kors, 2012). Citizens could no longer be denied or overcharged for coverage due to preexisting conditions. According to the US Department of Health and Human Services (n.d.), the ACA also expanded Medicaid, increasing access for more low-income citizens. Obama also took on gender equality issues by signing the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act of 2009 (Equal Pay Act, 2009), allowing individuals to combat gender wage discrimination.

Furthermore, the Obama administration confronted discrimination against LGBTQIA+ communities. He signed the repeal of the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" military edict that forced individuals to conceal their sexual orientation and identity, allowing them to serve openly in the military (Gay Stolberg, 2010). The Obama administration also provided guidance and support for best practices in schools to serve the needs of LGBTQIA+ students (Horsley, 2016). Obama's administration interpreted Title IX's sense of nondiscrimination to mean protection for trans students. Yet, advancing equitable causes like these stoked a new wave of discontent among many Americans. This profound sense of loss made way for what was to come.

In the summer of 2015, Donald J. Trump, a businessman and reality TV personality, announced his candidacy for the 2016 presidential election at Trump Tower, a building he owned and named after himself. In his speech announcing his candidacy, Trump seemed to wield the language of that growing disgruntled group who felt displaced by the election of a man of color with ideas that threatened the long-standing status quo. Trump spoke of immigrants from Mexico by saying, "They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists" (Trump, 2015).

"BUILD THE WALL!" (a cry to close the border and prevent immigration) became a popular chant associated with his campaign. I personally never thought this type of rhetoric would ever stand. But it did, and Donald Trump was narrowly elected the forty-fifth president of the United States, beating former Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, the first woman nominee from a major US political party.

Once in office, President Trump immediately rolled back progress in gender-inclusive policies. He banned trans soldiers from serving in the military. He rolled back Obama's guidance on LGBTQIA+ best practices in schools. He also called for a ban on immigrants from countries like Haiti and what he called "shithole" African countries (Fram & Lemire, 2018). Trump also called to repeal the ACA, which had produced equitable healthcare options for millions of Americans. Under his administration, he appointed three conservative Supreme Court justices, increasing the conservative majority to a 6–3 advantage. This conservative leverage ultimately led to the overturning of a woman's federal right to abortions in the *Dobbs v. Jackson*

Women's Health Organization (2022) decision that overturned *Roe v. Wade* (1973) in 2022.

After only one term as president, the US had a change of heart regarding the direction President Trump was taking the country. He lost the 2020 election to Vice President Joe Biden. Bennet and Bergan (2020) of the *New York Times* cited the key indicators of Trump's loss as the challenges he faced in dealing with the COVID-19 crisis. While Trump provided some support to mitigate the crisis experienced by the US during the pandemic shutdown, he lost support over how he handled it. Some critics also believed that Trump was obsessed with personal grievances (Bennet & Bergan, 2020), highlighting that his alienating, divisive rhetoric did not play favorably with crucial demographics such as elderly and college-educated suburbanites. After losing the presidency, Trump was accused of inciting an attack on the US Capitol on January 6, 2021. The goal, as we understand it now, was to interrupt the joint session of the US Congress and block the confirmation of the presidential election results. Among many other indictments, Trump was charged with conspiracy to defraud the United States of America with misinformation about election results and the obstruction of the certification of the 2020 election results (Congressional Review Service, 2023). Trump notoriously left the White House without attending President Biden's inauguration (Rascoe, 2021).

With four years of President Biden's administration came an attempt to reverse these changes and to reopen equitable opportunities for some marginalized populations. As one of his first official acts in office, President Biden issued a racial equity executive order to address barriers to underserved communities. He also responded to COVID-19 with the American Rescue Plan (ARP), which relieved marginalized communities by supporting small businesses and providing tax credits. As a part of the ARP, Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) grants were dispatched to help schools recover from the impact of COVID-19. President Biden's administration also adopted aggressive loan forgiveness programs for public servants and those with low incomes. The Biden administration reversed Trump's military ban on transgender individuals.

However, Donald Trump was reelected after President Biden abruptly ended his presidential campaign in the summer of

2024, leaving Vice President Kamala Harris three months to campaign against him. The November election season also yielded a conservative majority in the US House of Representatives and Senate. With this election win and the conservative-leaning Supreme Court, many speculate significant disruptions in equity work.

Bill Barrow (2024) of the Associated Press outlines his projections of what we can expect after President Donald Trump returns to the White House for his second term. First and foremost, Trump has promised an end to anything related to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) that uses federal funding. This elimination is slated to roll back the Biden administration's more robust interpretation of Title IX protections for transgender students. President Biden went a step beyond the Obama administration's guidance by proposing regulations that expressly prohibit discrimination against trans students. Trump will push to recognize only two genders while banning transgender athletes from women's sports.

The incoming Trump administration has also vowed to eliminate the federal Department of Education. He plans to prohibit teacher tenure, terminate diversity programs, and restrict the use of Critical Race Theory in K-12 education (Barrow, 2024). Trump intends to redirect higher education funding to a tuition-free online American Academy. The administration will use federal funding sanctions to reduce "woke" programs that address the needs of marginalized students.

Beyond these concerning promises that will curtail or outright eliminate equity efforts, Donald Trump has also pledged to initiate the massive deportation of undocumented and even naturalized immigrants (Barrow, 2024). To reduce immigration, he plans to institute restrictive entry policies and end birthright citizenship. This action will impact students born in the US who have undocumented parents. Moreover, women's healthcare rights may become even more restrictive. With *Roe v. Wade* (1973) already overturned, the Trump administration may limit access to FDA-approved abortion pills. Doctors may also have more judgment restrictions imposed on them when addressing abortions needed due to medical emergencies.

Ultimately, ideological and political shifts in election results since 2008 have called equitable outcomes for marginalized people in the US into question. On the heels of the Obama administration and the beginning of Trump's administration, I was the inaugural equity administrator in a large school district in 2016. I worked to facilitate more equitable outcomes for students and staff. The Equity Empowerment Continuum was born using the political curiosity Ms. Ivanovich instilled in me, my academic preparation, and my practical experience challenging resistance. Regardless of the political tide, leaders in all professions will be tasked with how to lead under what could be highly restrictive, inequitable mandates. This book provides a nuanced schema to help empower you to advocate for equitable outcomes amidst challenging realities.

How This Book Is Structured

This book examines how to address issues of marginalization in educational settings. However, the concepts in this book can be applied across all kinds of organizations, large or small, business or otherwise. It is a teaching tool examining how people and organizations have succeeded and failed when confronting marginalization and how those lessons can be applied to K-12 schools. Many of the topics and examples come from those schools. Others come from the world of business. A wide range of topics are discussed, and the many examples demonstrate the ongoing struggle to obtain equity for everyone across all professions. Readers are encouraged to reflect deeply on their own dispositions and practices by scrutinizing them through the lens of these real-life scenarios. This book leans heavily on examples from recent and historical world and national events, my own experiences, and specific examples related to addressing inequities within the school context.

Typically, a deductive approach is used to solve most problems. People start by identifying solutions to address the problem. As they implement the solutions, they encounter new challenges trying to address the initial problem. Ultimately, they must address these new challenges while still focusing on the initial problem. This book takes a more inductive approach. First, you acknowledge the difficulties you may encounter as you address a problem. You explore those difficulties and why they are hard. Once you understand the potential difficulties, you act using the EEC framework. Because of this, I have organized each of the chapters in an inductive fashion: first, I will acknowledge the problems that each chapter seeks to explore, then I will use the framework to discuss potential solutions.

FOUNDATION

The introduction and chapters 1 and 2 are the foundation for understanding the Equity Empowerment Continuum, which is the primary tool for understanding equity action and inaction in this book. People naturally want to know what to do about inequity without understanding the dynamics behind the actions they choose to take. However, the introduction explains why such a tool is needed to empower individuals and groups to pursue equitable outcomes in the face of resistance. Chapter 2 introduces the foundational pieces of that decision-making. Chapter 1 introduces and explores your ICE-T (identity, context, experiences, and the timing factor), which describes and informs your capacity to execute actions in equitable ways.

PHASES

Chapters 3–6 explain the four phases of the Equity Empowerment Continuum. These phases are fluid and changeable based on how you want to empower yourself to make more equitable decisions within your context. Your actions within each phase contribute to the overall outcome for your organization.

IDENTIFIERS

Each phase is defined by real-life historical and contemporary examples that illustrate the phase's most salient features, whether they arise as behaviors, actions, or beliefs. These examples are primarily drawn from the world of K-12 education but also include examples from the broader culture. While the main audience for this book is educators, many other professionals will be able to apply this content to their field, just as educators will be able to learn from the examples in business and popular culture. The identifiers do not define who you are as a person but can help you identify areas where your actions could be contradictory to your intent. These reflective features are meant to move you along the EEC.

PHASE VIGNETTES

At the close of each phase chapter, the reader is provided with a vignette that features the phase's identifiers. These vignettes feature fictitious individuals and situations, but they are based on real people and events. At the close of the vignette, an analysis is offered to explain how the individual and their team can push through to improve their approach to equity.

PROBING QUESTIONS

Questions throughout the book prompt readers to reflect on their own attitudes and actions regarding equity and empowerment. Practical questions strategically peppered throughout encourage readers to engage actively with the material, fostering a more profound exploration of their personal and professional spheres within the context of equity and empowerment.

END-OF-CHAPTER QUESTIONS

At the end of each chapter, the reader is asked a series of questions that can be answered individually or with a team.

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Latish C. Reed has a career that spans over two decades as a college admissions counselor, teacher, teacher-leader, school administrator, assistant professor of leadership, and organizational equity leader. She served as the inaugural equity administrator in a large school district, where she led equity policy development and professional learning to support districtwide improvement. Beyond education, Dr. Reed has shared her expertise with corporate, healthcare, and government professionals, consulting on critical equity issues to foster inclusive environments across a variety of sectors.

I dedicate this book to my SONshine, Zion.

Because of you, I want to make the world a better place. Keep running fast and far.

Love, Mom

Introduction

Do the Right Thing, a classic movie by Spike Lee, burst onto the scene in 1989 to a barrage of controversy. I was a rising high school senior who was raised in a pretty strict home where I could not go to R-rated movies. However, I was curious about the movie because of the controversy surrounding it. Even before its release, the movie's subject matter generated polarizing debate. Some were nervous that the movie would cause riots in urban Black and Brown neighborhoods. Denaby (1989) wrote a review in *New York Magazine* that predicted that the movie would incite Black and Brown people to violence. He said, "If Spike Lee is a commercial opportunist, he is also playing with dynamite in an urban playground. The response to the movie could get away from him."

The movie climax shows a white police officer killing a young Black man in front of neighbors. This happens after the police are called to break up a disturbance between the young man, his friends, and a white business owner. The officers struggle to subdue the large, dark-skinned Black man. Finally, one officer is able to put him in a chokehold with his baton. Despite the crowd's pleas to let him go, the officer keeps his grip tight around the man's neck. Several police officers form a barrier between the majority Black and Brown onlookers as they watch his body go limp. After neighbors watch the murder in real-time, the neighborhood erupts in an uprising.

Following the movie's release, no actual riots or uprisings were reported. In fact, years later, Lee would express his outrage that critics would even suggest that Black and Brown communities would riot because of watching a film (*The Guardian*, n.d.). Even though there was fear and disdain for the film at that time, others praised it for its candid portrayal of racial tensions of the time. Gene Siskel and Roger Ebert (n.d.), among the most famous and respected movie critics of the era, ranked the movie number one for 1989 and one of the top ten movies of the decade.

The following year, I was a college freshman who embraced my newfound freedom. I rented and watched *Do the Right Thing* and several other forbidden movie titles on my VHS player. Few movies would have the lasting impression that this film had on me. The movie provided a needed and textured context for reflecting upon the complex nature of race relations in diverse communities. It showed conflict and compassion while giving me a tangible piece of art to interrogate my own views and experiences with race as a young, Black woman on a predominately white campus.

Fast forward to May 25, 2020, Memorial Day, when the entire world was shut down in some fashion. I was stuck in the house with my eighth grade son whose school had worked hard to provide as much educational coherence as possible to families because we had all been thrust into the COVID-19 pandemic. While I, along with my family and friends, was anxious about the uncertainties of the virus's impact, I was somewhat enjoying the different pace of life. Like almost everyone else, I watched movies, made way too many home-cooked meals and desserts, and increased my social media engagement to two other platforms.

On the evening of May 25th, those new social media pages began to show images of a neighborhood in distress. I saw that another unarmed Black man, George Floyd, had died because of an interaction with the police in Minneapolis, MN. To avoid mental and physical anxiety, I had learned that as police brutality and killings of unarmed Black and Brown people became more publicized, I had to monitor what I took in from both social and network media. However, with the pandemic in full swing, any significant event would attract an extraordinary amount of attention. So, I started to read the early reports. At first, the official news outlets reported that George Floyd was resisting arrest, and that he had a medical crisis and died in police custody. These seemed to be the facts, but according to social media, there was much more to this story.

On social media, I saw reports that an officer had held his knee to Floyd's neck until he died. I was stunned. Within days, the national media outlets also began to report the same thing. Then, videos and pictures of the officer with his knee on Floyd's

neck began surfacing. There also seemed to be an actual cell phone video that had been captured by a high school student who was passing by. She ended up posting it on social media and that is how I was able to see it. I read what had happened, but I could not watch the video in its entirety. However, I did see a few images of the neighborhood residents that had assembled and watched the murder in real time.

The more details became available, the more this tragedy reminded me of the devastating climax scene of *Do the Right Thing*. The pictures released of officers instructing the crowd to stay back as Officer Derek Chauvin had his knee on Floyd's neck mirrored the events in the movie. People were barricaded from where they saw inhumanity take place in real time. Just as in the movie, the people had looks of horror on their faces as George Floyd was murdered in plain sight (Salter, 2021). At the time of Chauvin's trial, those who were there that fateful day described people yelling at officers to stop and becoming agitated when they realized Floyd had become unresponsive. It was the same as in the climactic scene of the movie, where everyone is in a daze after the victim is removed by the police.

The main difference was that in the movie, the neighborhood immediately erupted in a flame of uprisings. People began to destroy and set property on fire. But the people in the real-life Minneapolis neighborhood dispersed. They reemerged in social and national news outlets to tell the world of the unjust murder they witnessed in broad daylight. The power of their cell phone recordings and eye-witness testimony set off a global "awakening" about hard truths that marginalized people had been sharing for centuries.

REFLECTION

How does art reflect and influence real-life events, particularly in terms of social justice and human experiences? Which pieces of art, films, or music have had a significant influence on your understanding of race relations, injustice, or activism?

(Continued)

(Continued)

Source: Entertainment Pictures / Alamy

Source: Associated Press/Pool Court TV

TOP: In Spike Lee's 1989 film, *Do The Right Thing,* Mookie (Spike Lee), Sal (Danny Aiello), Vito (Richard Edson), and Pino (John Turturro) stand in shock outside of Sal's Famous Pizzeria after witnessing the police killing of Radio Raheem (Bill Nunn).

BOTTOM: On May 25, 2020, bystanders in a Minneapolis neighborhood looked on in shock as they witnessed the police killing of George Floyd.

In that moment, reality mirrored art. But the art was based on a reality that has known slavery and racial injustice for centuries, on a reality that allows some lives to matter less than others, and on a reality that encourages the perpetuation of racism and racial violence in its most important systems and institutions. During this time, my personal and professional experiences as a middle-aged Black woman merged, and I witnessed what I believed would be a real social and cultural shift. In my career as a teacher, scholar, educational leader, and consultant, my goal has always been to advocate and create change for traditionally marginalized

individuals and groups of people. I thought, "Now the whole world understands, and we will get the justice we seek!"

That moment has passed. It has been just a few short years since the tragedy of George Floyd's murder, but many of the challenges that we faced before have resurfaced with even more barriers to overcome. As the landscape changes and Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) efforts come under more criticism, it has become increasingly important for individuals to consider how they will continue to advocate for marginalized individuals and groups in the face of this resistance.

This book aims to build a bridge for people so they can move from ideas to tangible actions. Using the Equity Empowerment Continuum framework, I share lessons learned as a school practitioner, researcher, and the inaugural equity leader in a large organization to help readers ground their decision-making and actions, so they are oriented toward more equitable outcomes.

In 2016, I began as an inaugural equity administrator in a large school district with about seventy thousand students and an estimated eight thousand five hundred employees. I came to this role with a strong education in equity-based school leadership from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. I also spent several years as a professor and researcher teaching how to be an equitable leader. I offer both theoretical and practical insights into addressing equity within the work setting, as well as details from my personal journey.

That journey begins with navigating my ICE-T (identity, context, experiences, and timing) and employing that knowledge to advocate for equitable change in different settings and situations. Next, using personal and professional vignettes and authentic historical and contemporary examples, I put forth the Equity Empowerment Continuum (EEC) using black, white, and shades of gray to discuss and analyze various professional or personal actions or lack thereof that can lead to change on different levels. *The Complexities of Equity* offers a new perspective to navigating current challenges in implementing more equitable opportunities and structures for those who need more to succeed. The last chapter is a call to action for readers to lean into their spheres of influence to lead authentic change in their workplace and personal lives.

The world will continue to grapple with how different people from different walks of life coexist. This is an opportunity for the reader to reflect upon how they will contribute to making that world a better place for all.

DIVERSITY, EQUITY & INCLUSION (DEI) AT WORK

Once a fuller picture of what happened on that fateful day in Minneapolis emerged, global protests erupted. People flooded the streets worldwide to demand justice for George Floyd and the countless other victims of racial brutality and killing. It was almost as if the whole world said in that moment, "We will no longer turn a blind eye." With that came an awareness of the need to examine where people worked. Discussions about and examinations of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) became commonplace in the world of work.

But before discussing how DEI work has trended, I want to define equity, its companion terms (diversity and inclusion), and its ultimate goal to address life's "isms." CEO and author Catherine Mattice offered a basic equity definition in an article written for LinkedIn. According to Mattice (2023), "Equity refers to the fair and just treatment of all individuals, regardless of their diverse characteristics. It means ensuring that everyone has equal access to opportunities and resources and an equal chance to succeed. That means barriers preventing some individuals from succeeding must also be removed."

My definition is even simpler: *Instead of making sure everyone has the same or equal resources, opportunities, and/or support, equity means insuring they have what they need at the level they need it.*

REFLECTION

How do you define equity, personally and within your professional setting?

A common example: Instead of giving everyone the same pair of shoes, people need different shoes based on their foot size, purpose, climate, fashion sense, and other essential accommodations. You would not want someone with a size seven shoe who was going to a fancy gala to be given the same shoe as a person with a size twelve foot who works on a farm. Shoes would need to be tailored for different individuals in various contexts.

Another example is food portions for a growing child. I have been a single mom for most of my son's life. Food is an important part of our relationship. If ever my son is not hungry, there must be a serious problem. The amount of food I prepare is different from what I need, as he requires larger portions to accommodate his body. One staple food in our house is fish. When he was three, he would eat half a piece. Making fish for an eighteen-year-old man requires a minimum of four pieces with the option for seconds. I would get laughed out of my own home if I put a half piece of fish on his plate today. Like many Americans, I often struggle with maintaining an appropriate weight. As someone who could spare a couple of pieces of fish for my growing son, it really is about my willpower to make sure I do not eat more than I need and make sure he has seconds.

The term *equity* is often grouped with *diversity* and *inclusion*. Murray (2023) describes DEI work as "a three-pronged approach, which is why these terms are being used in so many of these new job titles." In this sense, **diversity** aims to "remove bias and barriers so that a company's workforce can reflect the heterogeneity of the communities it operates in." The strategy is to focus on hiring nontraditional candidates and ensuring they are compensated and offered the appropriate opportunities they need to thrive within the organization. **Inclusion** basically means that the organization invites and welcomes the ideas and attributes that arise as the organization diversifies.

Fernandes (2021), senior director of employer brand and culture and head of DEI Practice at Blu Ivy Group, also highlights the use of the "B" word, **belonging**. The money spent on DEI work often focuses on measuring DEI metrics, while missing the critical aspect of how people feel they belong in an organization. She suggests that we bring "together DEI and engagement experts to focus on DEI and engagement in a more holistic and effective way."

While the concepts of DEI seem simple, they have proven to be difficult to implement. For instance, those who always get what they need within an organization may fear that they will stop having their needs met as a result of DEI efforts. They fear having the extra they may be accustomed to receiving cut off as well. As Teresa Hopke (2022) noted in a *Forbes* article, nearly 70 percent of white men "report feeling 'forgotten' by diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts." They cite concerns about losing promotions or other benefits they might have expected before such efforts were implemented. Some white men resist Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) trainings because they feel blamed or shamed for their privileges. It highlights the zero-sum bias, where they perceive that giving opportunities to marginalized groups means fewer opportunities for them, leading to a desire for equality but with resistance to perceived preferential treatment.

People who have been accustomed to having their needs met (and beyond) typically make it difficult to "do the right thing" to achieve more equitable outcomes for others. This is where the challenges begin, but certainly not where they end.

From this point, in this book, I will mostly refer to Diversity, Equity and Inclusion, and other related titles as *equity*. This term is used as an umbrella term to capture the various titles used to describe DEI.

EQUITY AND LIFE'S "'ISMS" AND "OBIAS"

Those who resist equity tend to focus on maintaining the status quo, such as ensuring that those who do not have what they need are kept from getting it. The "isms" and "obias" of life have become the major barrier to creating more equitable outcomes for individuals and groups of marginalized people, specifically, "isms" and "obias" like racism, ableism, sexism, classism, homophobia, xenophobia, and nationalism. These describe a few of the ways people think about or treat others based on their identities. "Isms" are societal systems that marginalize others, while "obias"— conscious or unconscious prejudices—influence people's judgment and behavior toward others in an unfair way.

These impacts happen on a personal, organizational, and societal level. As a Black woman, I primarily face racism and sexism. Throughout this book, I will offer different ways to address the "isms" and "obias" of life, but especially within the educational context. Those seeking justice are committed to doing the right thing by working with both people who share their identity and those who do not.

Equity efforts have become a way for many to pursue justice in a variety of institutions, like corporations, schools, government agencies, healthcare, and the criminal justice system. With equity being popularized, society is thinking more critically about past inabilities to obtain equity for all. Obstacles to achieving such equity persist. As reported by the Equal Opportunity Employment Commission and *Harvard Business Review*, many people fear that if they were to admit or name their organization's failures and start asking tough questions, they could be targeted in a way that threatens their job security (Feldblum & Lipnic, 2016; Zheng, 2020). That is how equity work becomes political and ultimately marginalized.

EQUITY: THE EBBS AND FLOWS

Equity has become a part of most organization's standard operating procedures, particularly after the disparate impact of COVID-19 and the global resistance to violence against unarmed Black men and women displayed in 2020. As a past equity leader, my LinkedIn timeline is consistently flooded with organizations, companies, and institutions posting DEI chief, director, or manager positions to ensure that their organization is in line with the cultural shifts that are taking place. Maurer (2020) of The Society of Human Resource Management reported a spike in such roles following the watershed protests against the murder of George Floyd at the hands of the police. This growth is visible in the United States of America and can be seen globally. LinkedIn revealed that within the last five years, equity positions in Europe, the Middle East, and Africa have experienced a massive growth spurt, both at middle management and senior-level positions.

However, the momentum has slowed. In August 2023, Andrea Hsu (2023), labor and workplace correspondent for NPR, reported on corporate equity cutbacks:

> Economic pressures have led companies to pull back, cutting DEI jobs... alongside other human resources roles. Since last July, Indeed has seen DEI job postings drop by 38%.
>
> And then in June, in another blow to diversity advocates, the Supreme Court rejected the use of race-conscious admissions in higher education, setting off predictions that corporate policies around diversity will soon meet the same fate.

According to a LinkedIn study, the demand for chief diversity and inclusion officers increased by 168.9 percent between 2019 to 2022, but overall opportunities for these positions actually dropped by 4.51 percent between 2021 and 2022 (Anders, 2023). The same report details waning interest in diversity and inclusion due to recession concerns, fatigue, and high turnover rates. While diversity-related positions in this area ballooned, many who obtained them reported that they lacked the appropriate resources and supports for success.

This reduction could be connected to political backlash and economic constraints. In June 2023, Governor Greg Abbott of Texas signed a bill into law that bans DEI offices at public universities. This monumental action makes Texas the second state to take such drastic actions against equity efforts, with Florida being the first. This change means that DEI offices, programs, and training at these institutions will cease to exist. The students and staff who were empowered by these efforts will be left completely without recourse, and those who led DEI efforts at the university will be left without jobs.

Anti-equity measures have not stopped there. In June 2023, the US Supreme Court overturned an important law that provided more equitable outcomes in college admissions. Less than sixty years ago, US colleges and universities were officially desegregated with the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Higher Education Act of 1965. Even after the codification of desegregation, barriers for people of color persisted. It has

been documented that BIPOCs have been negatively impacted by racism and discrimination in college admissions. Yet, the *Students for Fair Admissions, Inc. v. President and Fellows of Harvard College* has eliminated race as a consideration in college admissions. The implications of this decision will have a long-lasting impact on college admissions for BIPOCs.

REFLECTION

In broader society, how have you witnessed equity efforts persist or wane in the last decade? How does that compare to your personal or professional context?

GET SET! ARE WE READY?

An organization's readiness for equity work is wide-ranging. In many cases, organizations have technical goals for achieving more equitable outcomes, but they lack an understanding of the complex issues they face, and struggle with the discomfort of vested stakeholders. Hiring equity leaders can be a good starting point for an organization, company, or institution. At the same time, equity leaders can become the "sage on the stage" responsible for moving an agenda with financial and human resources but limited to making minimal changes. From my observations and experiences, to attain true change, it is up to leaders and individuals to enact equity within their spheres of control and influence.

In these times, most educational institutions have considered or already initiated strategic planning and professional development in equity. As previously mentioned, this work may be contested depending on the state's political climate. This is not a "how to" equity strategy book. The book's intent is to help strengthen the resolve of individuals and groups to implement the needed actions to bring about equitable change. This book can assist readers in discovering a starting place within your sphere of influence and control, as well as a pathway to the sustainability of equity efforts.

PROGRAMS, POLICIES, AND PROCEDURES DO NOT CHANGE PRACTICES. PEOPLE DO!

In May 2020, the spotlight on DEI was heightened as the world, workplaces, and schools struggled to make sense of the recorded murder of George Floyd. Many people who had always seen themselves as good, decent, and fair human beings wanted to uncover deeper truths about race, police brutality, and systemic racism, and they searched for ways to learn more amid the COVID-19 pandemic shutdown. As many people reached for resources to gain new understanding, they bought *How to Become Antiracist* by Ibram X. Kendi (2019) and *White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism* by Robin Diangelo (2018). In June 2020, Kendi's book became a top seller in multiple major outlets (*New York Times* best seller list, *USA Today*, and Amazon). Similarly, *White Fragility* experienced multiple weeks as a *New York Times* best seller. Both books address race. This opened the door to many books and professional development training programs across all industries on topics related to uncovering and correcting long-standing societal injustices.

While I was equipped with a strong academic and research background, I quickly learned that practical tools were needed to support an entire organization on a journey of understanding and implementing the changes needed to increase equitable outcomes for students, families, and the community we served. One of the most useful tools in my work was *Courageous Conversations About Race* (CCAR) by Glenn Singleton (2021). Members from the district's Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) team initially did book studies on this book and introduced it to me. With their help, we were able to arrange state-sponsored training. It was an extremely impactful training. Ultimately, we were able to get some central service administrators, school board, and other community members trained on the book's protocol. After I left the role, the district adopted a train-the-trainer model, and all certified and classified district employees are now required to undergo training sessions on the CCAR framework.

CCAR (Singleton, 2021) offers a healthy way to engage in productive conversations about race. The most recent edition addresses deeper inequities exposed after the pandemic shutdown. This book contains the original components of the CCAR

protocol which includes a compass, four agreements, and six conditions that provide a foundation for positive dialogue. It is written in an accessible style that anyone can understand and is applicable to settings even beyond education. The compass is an excellent way to understand that all people come from different vantage points into this work. Additionally, the agreements are a structuring tool for setting a foundational stage for valuable conversations that can potentially be sensitive.

REFLECTION

What are the most useful tools you have at your disposal to address inequities within your work setting?

As powerful as this training is, if individual people are not committed to the process or leaders do not hold their staff accountable, no changes are made in practice. My mother always said to me as I grew up, "More of the same, produces no change." The Equity Empowerment Continuum is a tool that can help people determine their capacity to "do the right thing." I found people who were resistant to ideas of equity were also resistant to the training. Some people walked away from the trainings and follow-ups and never used the protocol. However, they "checked the box" and met the requirement by participating in the sessions.

After all the training, discussions, and debates about how to create a more equitable environment, the real area of focus is about what the individual or team of individuals will *do*. This book will help you determine to what extent you and others are willing to "do the right thing" to bring the change you seek to impact.

CHAPTER 1

Sipping on Your ICE-T

Your Identity, Context, and Experience Matter

I have taught several equity courses that specifically deal with issues related to leading equity in schools and districts. When I teach, my goal is to engage students in course content that addresses the inequities. We also discuss life's "isms," and "obias." As described in the introduction, "isms" and "obias," such as racism, sexism, and xenophobia, are barriers that suppress efforts to create equity for marginalized people. Sometimes, it is difficult to have conversations about sensitive and controversial topics. To prepare my students to authentically engage in class, we first spend time understanding ourselves and the others in the room. We explore each other's backgrounds and experiences. If there are twenty-three students in the class, I say, "This course has twenty-three individualized prerequisites. And no one has taken anyone else's prerequisites." In other words, an individual's background impacts how they think about and address inequity and life's "isms" and "obias."

After those same students graduate from their preparation program, they will become district and school leaders. Then, the task becomes to decide how to adequately address the inequities, "isms," and "obias" of life that are ever-present in schools. For this reason, before we talk about how individuals decide how to act, we must explore who individuals are.

UNIQUE DATA SOURCES

As a researcher, I have always sought different ways to collect and use data to discuss complex challenges. The data used to construct the Equity Empowerment Continuum (EEC) comes from the autoethnographic tradition. The EEC is a reflection framework I developed based on my experiences in both the academy and in the field. While there are several ways to describe autoethnography, Chang (2016) describes it as the understanding of self, others, and culture. The methodology connects the researcher with the culture, political atmosphere, and broader society that they exist within, but the autoethnographer is the primary source of data. Synder (2015) distinguishes autoethnography from other forms of personal narrative by noting that autoethnography goes beyond personal stories to analyze culture. In this book, I analyze culture and the broader context of my work by using my own experiences with historical and contemporary events so that readers can identify and reconsider what those events meant in their lives.

In addition, I draw from data that Dillard (2000) calls "life notes," which refer broadly to constructed personal narratives such as "letters, journal entries, reflections, poetry, music, and other artful forms of data" (p. 664). I used my "life notes" to create the EEC framework so that I could navigate equity based on my lived experiences, reflections, and current events, which is especially important because, as Dillard notes (2000), mainstream research does not always reflect the lived experiences of Black women. Therefore, any singular story we can offer contributes to the literature in its own right and as a counternarrative.

SIPPING ON YOUR ICE-T: YOUR IDENTITY, CONTEXT, EXPERIENCE, AND TIMING MATTER

Before we discuss the Equity Empowerment Continuum, it is important to understand the underlying foundations people have that inform their choices and decisions on action. Where do we begin? As a career educator, I love memorable acronyms to assist students' knowledge retention. Identity, context, timing, and experiences (ICE-T) are what provide the foundation for your decisions. Form 1.1 outlines the four components of your equity foundation.

FORM 1.1 ● What Is Your ICE-T?

Directions: In the spaces provided below, write notes that describe your personal ICE-T (Identity, Context, Experience, and Timing).

ICE-T	DESCRIPTION
Identity	
Context	
Experience	
Timing	

These four major components all matter in your impetus to make actionable changes. As you navigate the equity landscape, some of the ICE-T factors are within your sphere of control and influence, while others are completely outside of your control. The Equity Empowerment Continuum helps you assess how you can move forward despite the complexity of this work. In other words, your ICE-T can help you "push through the shades of gray," in your equity work.

Note Regarding ICE-T: The following four sections are described out of order. I have switched the C (Context) with the E (Experience) for a better flow. I believe that a person's experiences are slightly more salient than their context.

YOUR IDENTITY MATTERS

Equity work starts with the self-exploration of your **identity**. Understanding your own identity and who you are in relation to the equity challenges you are facing is the essential starting place. As you attempt to create more equitable outcomes in your immediate life, community, and workplace, you must first understand yourself.

While the United States Declaration of Independence holds that "all men are created equal," the group of people who wrote the declaration were white, cisgendered men of middle to upper-class wealth. Three of the five men who drafted the document owned Black slaves. Even though, over time, we have changed the interpretation of the Declaration to reflect the diversity of our contemporary nation, the original language still stands. If you happen to be a poor LGBTQ woman of color, these words did not and perhaps still do not apply to you. On the other hand, if your identity is closer to the committee of five men who drafted the Declaration, you may feel affirmed and empowered. The words of our nation's founders have colored the way we all experience equality in this country. Nonetheless, your identity has caused you to experience life in a particular way, influencing your disposition.

Oftentimes, people want to jump to the solutions before identifying the problem and their self-awareness about where they stand in relationship to potential solutions. When I facilitate equity professional development workshops, people often want to get a list of things to do to change inequitable outcomes.

So, we must start with ourselves. It is much easier to turn the spotlight on everything outside of us and expose where flawed thinking or inequitable actions are taking place with respect to others. However, the first step in this process is to examine *yourself* by becoming aware of your own biases and behaviors and the ways that they contribute to inequities. Although it is extremely uncomfortable, it is essential to explore them.

An easy way to think about your identities is through a simple activity our equity team facilitates, which is called the identity pie. The identity pie is a way to show how we have specific identity pieces that make up the whole of who we are. A simple definition of "identity" is a set of characteristics that describe your essential qualities. Some examples of identity we can see include, but are not limited to, race, class, gender expression, and body type. But there are many other attributes that help define you.

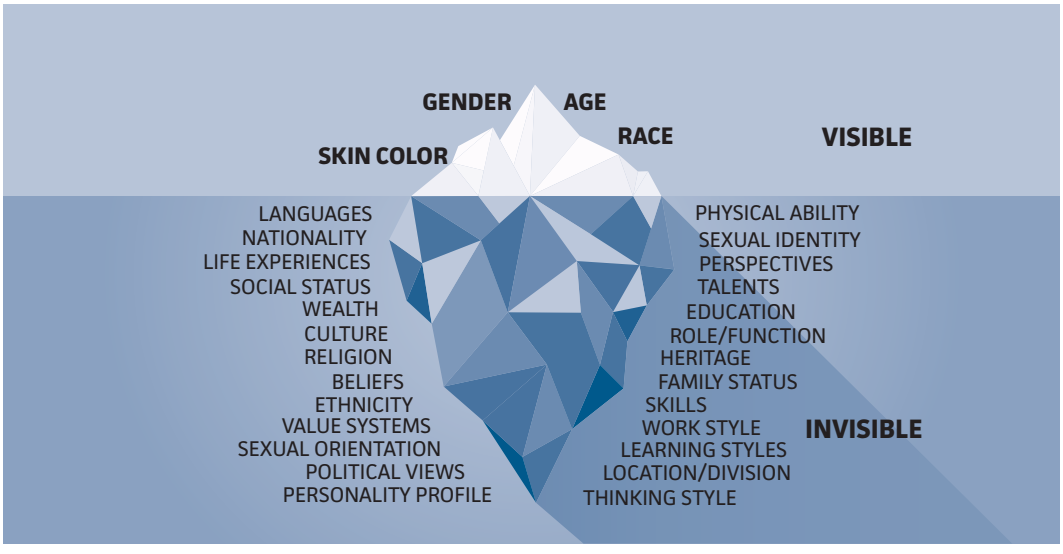
To explain **cultural identities**, Hollie (2017) used an identity iceberg to explain that some of the personal characteristics we exhibit are seen, while others are not (see figure 1.1). For example, you can make a lot of assumptions about who I am based on my appearance. I am a cisgendered Black woman with a feminine gender expression. I usually wear makeup, jewelry, and sometimes a dress or skirt. I wear natural, unstraightened short hair that has gray peeking out around my face. I am of average height, but I carry more than average weight. These physical characteristics may lead one to assume a lot about who I am and what I believe.

One time, I co-facilitated a workshop with a white female colleague about identity. We wanted to mirror an activity about people's identities and the assumptions that others hold about them. To prepare, I sat opposite my colleague and asked her to erase everything that she knew about me and provide who she might think I am based on my visible identities. Even though I am a middle-class woman with a doctoral degree, she said that I looked like I could have been a sales associate at a store like Walmart or Target who lived in the inner city. While there is nothing wrong with a Black woman working at a retail outlet, I was shocked at her assessment.

I told her that she looked like she came from the suburbs and was a soccer mom. But for some reason, I assumed that she was

in a bowling league. I do not consider a bowling league to go with a suburban soccer mom. At the end of the day, we *do* judge books by their covers. As such, we have to acknowledge and uncover ways to combat these inherent stereotypes. If we do not, this will impact our decision-making.

FIGURE 1.1 ● Visible and Invisible Attributes



Source: Chavapong Prateep Na Thalang / Alamy

The second part of our cultural identity encompasses the visible attributes. We need to go below the water's surface to understand the invisible identities in the iceberg illustration that Hollie (2017) uses. When discussing unseen identities in the workshop, I would always reveal things about myself that were not visible. It was at this point that I would talk about living with Lupus, a chronic autoimmune disease. While many disabilities are visible, the impacts of Lupus are often hidden. The disease keeps me fatigued, which means I never feel well-rested and run out of energy throughout the day. This disease has impacted my life by affecting my joints and kidney function. It created an early onset of arthritic conditions in my fingers, knees, and elbows. Over the course of the twenty-plus years since I was diagnosed, I have experienced something called flare-ups. During flare-ups, all the symptoms are elevated, which means I experience extreme fatigue and increased pain in my joints. To get these symptoms under control, I take a daily

maintenance cocktail of ten pills. One of the most helpful but dreadful medications I take is an oral steroid that causes fast and steep weight gain.

Lupus has impacted my life in many ways. First, as a single mother of a young boy, my energy levels have had to be balanced against a demanding career that requires me to be always alert and sharp. When people meet me, they would never know that as soon as I get home from work, I sometimes go to bed immediately and do not leave it until the next morning. Looking at me, people may assume that I do not exercise or monitor my diet. It is very much to the contrary. I exercise a minimum of four times per week, and I monitor my diet (for the most part, like everyone else). However, the oral steroid regimen, in combination with my consistent low-to-medium-grade level of fatigue, has created a plateau for my weight.

REFLECTION

What visible and invisible identities do you have? What assumptions do you make about people based on what you see of them? What do you get wrong? And what do people often get wrong about you?

Our identities can be a source of marginalization or privilege. In recent years, educators, coaches, and other professionals who discuss privilege and marginalization have had sanctions wielded against them for discussing such notions in public classrooms or workplaces. I am sure that a diverse population was likely not what our nation's founding fathers had in mind when they wrote "all men are created equal." But today, many majority-conservative state legislatures are passing laws that prevent teaching about the historical marginalization of certain groups of people in a factual manner.

These pieces of legislation are putting the squeeze on exploring identities, whether your own or someone else's, so as to preserve the comfort of the privileged, who often feel uncomfortable discussing what they have gained because of that privilege.

None of us want to feel bad because of anything that we have not personally done. However, if we are committed to an equity agenda, we must commit to ensuring the inclusivity that our nation's founders wrote about when they claimed the equality of all people. If we consider the "isms" and "obias" people frequently exhibit, we can understand that people's life experiences are made difficult due to the identities that they hold and the way people respond to them. It is your choice to determine to what extent you are willing to explore these identities and their relationship to the inequities we see in our society. As James Baldwin said, "We can disagree and still love each other unless your disagreement is rooted in my oppression and denial of my humanity and right to exist." The Equity Empowerment Continuum tool will directly help assess the extent of your actions towards the end goal of increased equitable outcomes.

YOUR EXPERIENCES MATTER

Our experiences help form our thoughts and dispositions. These experiences are what call us to action. In his book *Courageous Conversations About Race*, Singleton (2021) has readers explore their racial autobiography, an activity that uncovers how race has impacted their lives. In her book, Wilkinson (2021) also uses the "story of origin" as a critical starting point to understand people's capacity to act with an equity mindset. As you attempt to use your identity in this work, your experiences will emerge as a foundation for your actions.

In addition to sharing suggestions about how to navigate equity implementation, my purpose in writing this book is to share my experiences related to the identities I hold as a Black girl, young woman, and professional woman. My experience is also an extension of my ancestors and the elders who came before me. When my enslaved ancestors arrived in this country, they pushed as far as they could in each generation so that I could be who and what I am today. My maternal grandfather, Eddie Tharbs, always told me to get as much "paper as you can." What he meant was that I should pursue as many degrees and certifications as I could because he only got a third-grade education.

With a leadership career spanning over two decades, I have been an admissions counselor, teacher, teacher-leader, school administrator, charter school proposal writer, grant writer, PhD

student of educational leadership and policy analysis, assistant professor of leadership, adjunct professor, district equity administrator, consultant, and speaker. While my primary focus is the education field, I have consulted with business corporations, the healthcare field, and governmental agencies on issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion. Enacting an equity agenda is needed across all organizations and institutions not only because it is the right thing to do but to ensure that the organization is not violating nondiscrimination laws. My blended background and lived experience as a Black woman navigating systems and institutions in the US also provides an important vantage point. In the next section, I will share how my experiences have shaped my pursuit of equitable outcomes.

SCHOOL EXPERIENCES

I am the oldest of four daughters. My dad was a young man who excelled throughout school and had musical talents, which led to local stardom in a regional band. Raised as the fourth eldest son in a large family of eleven children in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, my father came of age as a young Black man during the civil unrest of the 1960s. He was raised to advocate for himself and others no matter what. Through many colorful stories from my father over the years, I learned about how my father spoke truth to power even in the face of the racism he experienced.

After marrying at the age of twenty-one and having me, my dad decided to become a Jehovah's Witness, which has several specific guidelines that must be followed. For example, Jehovah's Witnesses do not celebrate holidays or recite the Pledge of Allegiance. My father made it clear to my teachers and me that I would not participate in either of these activities at school. That meant I was to be excused to the hallway when birthday treats were handed out and when the traditional "Happy Birthday" song was sung. I also went into the hallway every morning when the Pledge of Allegiance was recited. So, instead of taking a knee, I was "taking the hallway" like Colin Kaepernick would eventually take a knee, but for different reasons.

While I never formally became a Jehovah's Witness, the experience of growing up and having to stand against the status quo developed my capacity to stand on certain principles even if they are unpopular. At first, when I was in kindergarten, it was

uncomfortable to be different in these ways. But, as time went on, I became comfortable being uncomfortable.

Raised in Chicago, my mother was the middle child of fourteen. Her parents were property and business owners in Black neighborhoods in Chicago. They ruled with an iron fist and, at times, probably used tactics that would now be considered abusive by today's standards. Nevertheless, my mother was a smart kid who found her way into college with the help of her oldest brother. Mom attended college in Wisconsin. This was a whole new world than she was used to in Chicago. She went from being around all Black people in her school and neighborhood to being one of the few Black students at an all-white university. College is where she would meet my father. She married him at the age of twenty to start a young family.

As my sisters and I are darker-skinned girls with kinky hair, my mom always encouraged us to wear our natural hair and braids in the 1980s, when many Black people were straightening their hair to match white standards of beauty. She even found brown band-aids called Soul-Aids because the regular flesh-color ones did not match our Brown skin.

My mother has always had a strong sense of justice, making her an outcast in most spaces. As Black girls, the message that my sisters and I always got from my mother was that we belonged anywhere we deserved or wanted to be. Despite whatever barriers white society and individuals tried to place in front of us, we learned to always stand toe-to-toe with them so that we could have access to whatever they were blatantly or covertly trying to stop us from having. We often went to stores not frequented by people of color. My mother required that we receive the same top-quality service that other shoppers received. And if we did not, she would request the manager. She would "school" them on the gap in services we received and request that we be made whole. We often left stores with discounts or extra spoils due to her advocacy. Sometimes, if we did not receive justice in the store, she would follow up with a letter to a corporate office. Even if it were months later, she would have some sort of settlement. This taught me that the race is not always given to the swift but to those who can endure it until the end. You must be strategic in the pursuit of justice. You must also prepare backup plans when your first petition is ignored or refused.

When I was of school age, I participated in a school integration social experiment after the civil rights movement. In the mid-seventies, my mother had just had my sister when I went to kindergarten. Being the "princess" I was, my mother could not fathom me walking a few blocks to the neighborhood school alone. And as the mother of a newborn, it was unreasonable that she would have to walk my new baby sister and me to school. My mom went to the school district central office to figure out how her little "princess" would get to school safely. Their solution was a bus that could take me to school in a neighboring suburb.

So, in 1977 I was bused to a neighboring, predominately white suburb for kindergarten. I remember the smell of drying paint on art projects completed by the morning kindergarteners and the graininess on the bottom of my shoes from the sandbox station when I walked past it. I also remember wondering why we had to lay down at school for a nap when we had our own beds at home.

But what I remember most from my entire time in kindergarten was that I spent most of it in the coatroom. I remember the coatroom in the fall, winter, and spring. The coatroom attire went from summer jackets to fall sweaters, winter coats, boots, mittens, hats, and scarves. It changed in the spring to cool rain boots that my parents wouldn't buy and raincoats. Then, back to summer jackets. Why did I spend such a great deal of time in the coatroom? I was sent there because most things I said or did were considered an exhibition of bad behavior. I don't quite remember all the details, but I remember being sent to the coatroom every time something happened. When my parents came to school and the teachers told them about my behavior problems, my parents were extremely surprised. It became clear that "princess" Latish did not belong in this new world with white teachers and students who were consistently misunderstanding her.

I just didn't fit. At one point, the teachers suggested to my parents that I be tested for special education because I was having an extremely hard time adjusting to school. My mother had the foresight to know that a special education label on a little Black girl who seemed to be able to interact everywhere other than school would not be a good idea. This is not to say that students

who need special education services should not get them. But she knew that Black students with special education labels are more likely to be at-risk for not graduating on grade level, and that was not an option.

Fortunately, while I did not fit in, I had a few teachers I will forever be indebted to who saw my potential and did not write me off. Ms. Perkins was the elementary school music teacher who recognized that I was musical, could sing, and was extremely dramatic. She gave me solos and even suggested I take the lead in one of the grade-level musical productions. Ms. Furlong, my second-grade teacher, knew I was a tough cookie but worked very closely with my parents to help support my leadership potential. Finally, Ms. Merrigan, my sixth-grade teacher, also hung in there with me and never held anything against me. Every day was a new day. When I graduated from the University of Wisconsin-Madison with my PhD, I had a celebratory dinner at a restaurant in Madison, Wisconsin. The server informed me that I had an important phone call. When I got on the phone, Ms. Merrigan was on the line to personally congratulate me on my accomplishment. I was overwhelmed when she told me she had always known I would succeed.

Unfortunately, several other experiences led me to believe I did not belong in that school. When I was in the fourth grade, my teacher made sure that I received any and every sanction that her behavior system allowed. Students could earn green tickets that could be accumulated for opportunities to pick something from a "treasure chest" at the end of the week. Rarely did I earn green tickets. I was the recipient of yellow tickets, which reflected the poor choices or behaviors that I always seemed to be caught making in her class. At that point, I hated school. My teacher always made sure that the other students knew that Latish was different.

I remember a particular lesson about dialect that she taught. I was really into this lesson because she pointed out people talked differently in different parts of the country. She explained that people from New England had specific speech patterns and used different words than we used in the Midwest. I enjoyed the new learning until she asked me to repeat in front of the class: "May I ask you a question?"

I said, "May I 'ax' you a question?" No one caught it at first, so she asked me to repeat myself. I did. She then pointed out that, instead of enunciating the word "ask," I used the word "ax." She then incorrectly named this as an exclusive feature of a Black dialect. (The use of "ax," or "aks" is common in many dialects and was once the preferred form printed in *Bibles* across the English-speaking world [Lindsey, 2024].). But perhaps my language pattern did exemplify Black dialect in some ways. Either way, I was embarrassed and mortified that she pointed it out in front of my classmates at nine years old. If that wasn't enough, she announced to the class that she was seeking new ideas for more exotic dinners to make for her family. She turned to me and asked, "What did you have for dinner last night?" She looked disappointed when I said, "Baked chicken, rice, and green beans."

In the fifth grade, when my teacher taught about slavery, she pointed out that some of the women slaves during that time went into labor in the field as they were working. They would have their babies under trees but then put the baby on their backs and continue to work. A classmate asked me in front of the entire class if I was born under a tree. My teacher said nothing as the class laughed. I have had kids surprised that the bottom of my feet and the insides of my hands were "white." I have also been interrogated about why my hair looks the way it does or why oil needs to be added to it.

These experiences of being "othered" shaped my inherent nature to advocate for others because I know firsthand what it feels like to be on the margins, particularly in the educational setting. As these incidents occurred, my parents always stood in the gap for me. They never blindly took my side because they knew I had a spirited character that really did challenge authority. But my parents would not allow me to be railroaded into a place where I would not be able to recover or achieve my fullest potential. They believed that I had the potential to make it through this situation.

REFLECTION

What experiences of "othering" have you had that have informed your advocacy?

From an early age, I have always had a sense of justice. My mother always instilled that I must stand up for what is right. When I was a child, I watched her always stand out, always be different, and take a lot of criticism for it. My mom never shied away from any fight, big or small. This helped develop my sense of justice and advocacy for others.

COLLEGE EXPERIENCES

I attended college at a predominantly white, Catholic liberal arts university. My undergraduate experience was academically and emotionally traumatic at times. I always knew that I had what it took to graduate, but throughout the course of my time as an undergraduate, I had several experiences where I was made to question if I was good enough to graduate despite everything that had been poured into me to prepare for college.

In my first semester of college, I took the English introduction course that all freshmen were required to enroll in. We had small classes of about twenty-five students. Over the course of the semester, four or five papers were due. One of the required readings for this class was a compilation of essays. Some were from professors, but a portion of the essays came from former freshmen. My instructor would assign additional essays throughout the course as we studied writing and prepared to write the assigned papers for the semester. We also had to purchase packets of all the papers students wrote for each assignment. Part of our work was analyzing and giving feedback on our classmates' papers. In class discussions, my classmates would often raise topics that I had written about as examples of techniques they found to be exemplary. They would mention ideas like, "I really liked the way Latish provided an attention-grabbing introduction," or "Latish really used smooth transitions between different ideas." However, when I would get my paper back, I never could manage to garner an A from the professor.

Being the studious student I was, I made appointments to see my instructor to find out what I needed to do to get an A on the upcoming papers. She gave me some good feedback, but one day, she told me that she was grading me on a different level because I was such a good writer. That puzzled me because the course was a general education section, not an honors-level course. As we neared the end of the first semester, my teacher asked to

speak to me after class. After everyone left, she told me that she had submitted one of my essays to be reviewed by the English department to be included in the *Freshman English Reader*, a college textbook comprised of outstanding texts written by the university's college freshmen. She just wanted me to know. She wasn't sure that it would be included, and the chances were pretty slim. Keep in mind that she gave me a B+ on the paper that I wrote, which she submitted. Lo and behold, this paper was selected for the *Freshman Reader* and was published there multiple years after that year. This was the first of many experiences where I understood that I had something to contribute that people would always want. But others would not always be willing to credit and acknowledge my gifts and talents properly. If it had not been for the TRIO Educational Opportunity Programs, designed to support students of color and first-generation students, I am not sure if I would have graduated from that university.

I am grateful that I was reaffirmed during my graduate school experiences at Alverno College in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Both places were fertile grounds for building my confidence and capacity to write in ways that led to professional and academic success. My writing has been published in some of the top academic journals in the field of education leadership. I have also written grants, securing hundreds of thousands of dollars of funding.

PROFESSIONAL CAREER EXPERIENCES

Early in my education career, I experienced some success. Following a couple of years as an admissions officer for my alma mater, I had the great fortune to become a middle school teacher in an urban school district. After three years as a classroom teacher, I worked under a gifted, innovative school administrator as an assistant principal in a school that had been "left behind." During my four years in that school, we made incredible gains that impacted the lives of many students. I was the chief proposal writer for turning the school into a district charter school, which enabled us to pursue many innovative initiatives that led to large academic improvement gains for students. I wrote and managed grants that contributed to building the capacity of our staff so that they would be culturally responsive to the students we served.

For the first ten years of my professional career as a K-12 educator and administrator, I experienced many classroom and leadership successes. I was not prepared for the major hit to my professional career that was to come. In 2014, I was denied promotion to associate professor with tenure at the university where I worked. This denial came despite strong progress over the course of my time at the institution.

The year before I was denied tenure, I ranked number two in a department of eleven colleagues. The ranking was based on publications, teaching evaluations, and service to the field, university, and local community. In five prior years of submitting annual productivity portfolios for review to the tenured members of my department, I had never been led to believe that I would not be tenured. Every year, my review feedback indicated that I was progressing adequately toward tenure.

On the day of my tenure consideration, I was asked to be present in my office while the tenured department members deliberated. I felt confident that I would receive tenure, so I sat in my office answering emails. When the meeting was over, the department chair came into my office to explain that the committee's voting results were split, which meant the decision was not to grant me tenure. I remember feeling the blood drain from my body, and I basically went numb. I don't recall much of anything he said after that. I just felt like I needed to leave immediately to pick up my son from after-school care.

After this devastating blow, I had a few colleagues, families, and friends who encouraged me to go through the appeals process, but this did not produce the reversed outcome I sought. As I watched the details unfold in this devastating situation, I realized how institutional racism, sexism, and ableism can be upheld with codified legal rules. Every attorney I contacted seemed to be connected to the university in some way. Literally, the first attorney I saw for a consultation explained that, in full disclosure, he used to work as an adjunct professor for my department teaching the school law class.

Without money or networks, I felt there was no pathway to justice. Appeal processes and protections only work if those who prosecute them are truly independent of the institutions involved or are not financially tied to them either through a paycheck or

any other form of financial remuneration. Other than that, many times the very people these systems were designed to protect find themselves climbing an uphill battle with pebbles, rocks, and boulders rolling down the hill directly toward them. It takes courage to speak out against an organization you work for if you find yourself in the situation I was in or if you are a part of the organization and you recognize inequities or injustices.

Even though being denied tenure was heartbreaking, I was able to move on. However, it has been an uphill battle not letting that experience define who I am. Many people of color who experience situations like this often make tough decisions to survive by suffering silently. As a single mother, I had to decide to either fight them with my whole being or find another job that would provide me with an income that could sustain a reasonable lifestyle with some amount of peace. Legal warfare is not a peaceful existence at all.

Although I lost the appeal, I did as much as possible to advocate for myself and others. While I was not granted tenure, my case caused restructuring in the school's review process. Some policies, practices, and procedures changed due to standing up for myself. This same courage to speak my truth even when my voice shook at times is the same voice that I use in advocating for change within other spaces. I learned from that experience that there are different ways to think about change. This book is intended to help you make such impactful changes within your sphere of control and influence.

REFLECTION

What negative experiences have you had because of your identity? In what ways did you advocate for yourself personally or professionally? Was your self-advocacy more private or public? Did your self-advocacy impact others positively or negatively?

YOUR CONTEXT MATTERS

In pursuing more equitable outcomes, it is imperative to identify what you are doing and what you are hoping to do within your context. Some of you reading this book now may be in or

may have filled one of the many new equity leader positions that have been created for businesses and institutions across the United States. You may understand the goal of increasing equitable outcomes in your organization, but it is likely you have encountered resistance that prevents the work from progressing. You could be a leader who does not explicitly lead equity work but must produce equitable outcomes based on the organization's vision and mission. Or you could be an employee who has participated in equity training and thought, "So, what now? What do I do with this newfound equity talk?" Or you could be someone who has suffered injustice because of who you are, and you want to think of ways to better advocate for yourself and others in similar circumstances.

My context was being assigned the role of leading equity work within my organization. I became the first equity specialist in an urban school district, and it was my dream job. It felt like the culmination of all my education experiences as a teacher, professor, and administrator who studied and advocated for marginalized people. This is where this book was born. Coming from the academy, I was used to giving students readings, having discussions, and giving assignments where we intentionally called out issues of institutional inequities, -isms, and -obias. As an academic, I became comfortable with academic freedom, which provides some protection and latitude for challenging mainstream ideas. I came into my new district administrator role like an equity tornado. After reviewing the data, I had all the challenges identified and was ready to gather everyone up to fix them. After all, they hired me for my expertise in equity. So clearly, we were about to create a more equitable environment for the students, families, and communities we served.

When I signed up to be an equity leader, I had to come to terms with the real context of where I was commissioned to do this work. Being the first-born and eldest sister in my family, I want to lead and break through barriers as best I can. As I discussed some of my initial leadership frustrations with one of my younger sisters, she replied, "Latish, Martin Luther King didn't work for no school district." She was giving me a reality check that most revolutionaries are not likely to be on the payroll in a large bureaucratic organization steeped in the status quo. Moving quickly and

breaking down barriers all at once was unlikely. Changing this system would take patience and incremental work.

While I had one equity intern (who was head-and-shoulders above anything that I could have ever hoped for), I did not have a department or anyone who was specifically identified to help provide an equity lens for my district, which had over seventy thousand students and five thousand employees. Yet, the job description included writing and reviewing policies, procedures, and practices, facilitating professional development, partnering with all departments, and leading equity discussions with senior teams, management, teachers, students, and the community. When I took this role, equity officers, directors, and/or chiefs often found themselves with big orders to fill and few resources to fill them with. Nonetheless, in my setting, I found many colleagues who wanted to support this work in addition to their assigned tasks. During my time in this role, I worked to establish an equity policy, revise our nondiscrimination policy to include more gender inclusivity, and establish a district framework for culturally responsive practices.

The experiences that I had in making an impact in this organization are what led me to share how these things were accomplished. I often explain my work with the specific task of exploring and changing equity as dancing the Cha-Cha. In the Cha-Cha, couples move forward and backward with alternating fast and slow steps. But while their feet are animated and often quick in their movements, their torsos remain steady. This is how I felt many days in the work I loved. We updated and revised our nondiscrimination policy to embrace gender inclusion and provided professional development for all administrators and teachers. However, I still received calls from students and families about situations within the school where the policy was not being followed. While we passed an equity policy, the document's accompanying guidance took many years to develop.

Nonetheless, progress and impact were made during my time in this role, and I encountered many people who came to this work through different entry points. Some embraced equity, while others did not. But I always hoped that no matter how

they entered, they would leave feeling more empowered and ready to change something they were doing that would lead to better outcomes for the students, families, and communities they served.

The other context for my work at that time was being the single mother of a fourth-grade Black boy who was extremely hard-working in school, had a positive disposition, and possessed all the potential in the world. This job was important for me as it was my first work experience after not being tenured. I had to pick my life up and move on. After all, I had to provide for my son, who watched his mother fight a system. I look at him today and believe that he is better for it. He will also be better for watching his mother collect her gifts and talents and move on to make new impacts in new ways and spaces. My work was about creating a better education for the thousands of children in the district and creating the right environment for my son to thrive in, so he could reach his fullest potential in that same district. The context of being a Black woman with a Black son was important for my willingness and inspiration to do as much as I could within the equity role I was serving.

THE HISTORICAL LANDSCAPE

The other critical part of identifying your context is determining the historical landscape within the organization or situation you have entered. It is important to ask yourself what you are trying to achieve given the current context. Is your organization trying to organize an initial implementation of an equity mission and vision with new policies and procedures? Has the organization been "working on equity" for a while and is now trying to understand why nothing has changed? Are you trying to understand what you specifically can do to improve the conditions within your workspace?

In my case, there had always been efforts within the school district to provide more equitable opportunities for students who were more at-risk than others due to the circumstances they were born into. That seems to be the nature of urban public education. It is tasked with educating mainly Black and Brown, economically challenged children and trying to determine ways to better serve them. There is much-needed funding allocated

to what appears to be resources for improving students' educational experiences. But the question is always, "Is it enough?" Are resources being used expeditiously in a way that will improve outcomes? The measures seem clear when districts and schools set improvement goals, but there is little accountability when improvement does not occur.

I realized that it was important to illuminate the district's inequities. First, very few people in the district even understood what equity meant. After getting organized, I had to go on an organizational tour to explain "equity." That meant establishing relationships across the organization to help them to understand where inequities existed in the first place. In education, equity is often an implied goal. It is usually not codified within the organization's policies and procedures *as a need*. Once everyone understood where the inequities existed, my superintendent and chief asked me to create an equity policy and revise our nondiscrimination policy to be more gender inclusive. Again, this process included gaining insight into what equity would and should look like within the context of the district.

Part of this work included reviewing the equity frameworks, policies, and procedures in other organizations like mine. This inventory included assessing other organizations' policies, procedures, and practices. I also used the Wisconsin Response to Intervention (RtI) Center's Model to Inform Culturally Responsive Practices (2017). The framework was extremely useful in helping the district and school staff understand that there is a clinical process to becoming a more equitable individual and organization. The work of Dr. Gloria Ladson-Billing, a legendary K-12 scholar, also informed this model. The work of prolific practitioner-scholars, Drs. Anthony Muhammad and Sharroky Hollie, informed my school leadership and practical pedagogy recommendations. While this approach was intended for understanding and combating inequities within education, I have successfully adapted it to my work with government, healthcare, and corporate organizations too.

Walking into an organization as the first equity leader was a big task. However, I found it essential to understand what work had been done prior to my coming. I assembled an equity commission that represented all facets of the organization. We conducted analyses of policy, academic benchmark data, initiatives,

and practices that were occurring in the district at that time. Our goal was to build upon the many positive things happening and mitigate or eradicate policies or practices that yield inequitable outcomes. If you do not carry an official title in equity, it is still important to know and understand the context and history of what you need to do to advance your team's equity outcomes. Ask yourself: How will you start the work or carry forward what has already been done meaningfully to have a positive impact?

When you think about the personal context of leading change in your life, recognize that you have been conditioned to think in specific ways about concepts such as race, class, and those with different orientations or identities. Then, you can determine how to begin. As in the professional setting, researching to determine how others think about change in these areas is a great place to start before you have conversations with the teams and groups you will work with.

There is an adage that asks, "How do you eat an elephant?" The response is "one bite at a time." As you push through "shades of gray," understand what you control, what you can influence, and the things outside of your control.

TIMING MATTERS

A Time for Everything

There is a time for everything and a season for every activity under the heavens:

> . . . a time to plant and a time to uproot, a time to kill and a time to heal, a time to tear down and a time to build . . . a time to scatter stones and a time to gather them, a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing, a time to search and a time to give up, a time to keep and a time to throw away, a time to tear and a time to mend, a time to be silent and a time to speak, a time to love and a time to hate, a time for war and a time for peace.
>
> Ecclesiastes 3:1-8, Bible, New International Version

The T in the ICE-T refers to the important nature of timing. In the battle for equity, windows of opportunity come and go. As someone seeking equity and justice, you will find that learning

how to take advantage of timing is critical to your success. Throughout history, people have often felt injustice; however, they continued to live with it because the timing did not seem right to change it. As time passes, someone stands up to be a catalyst for changing the status quo. It may take a while for the momentum to develop. But people become engaged, the times change, and the opportunity for justice emerges.

In 1964, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote:

> The conservatives who say, "Let us not move so fast," and the extremists who say, "Let us go out and whip the world," would tell you that they are as far apart as the poles. But there is a striking parallel: They accomplish nothing; for they do not reach the people who have a crying need to be free.

In a utopia, everyone would agree on what equity and justice look like at the same time. Unfortunately, agreement on what it appears to be and when it can be achieved is scant. Since George Floyd's death, many people who had never seriously considered injustice are trying to understand its historical and contemporary implications. A common refrain is, "I'm on a (equity) journey." On the other hand, those who have lived with injustice through their identities and experiences since coming into this world are almost always ready for change.

THE N-WORD AND BEYOND: CHANGING TERMS OVER TIME

Timing is important for so many reasons, including the use of terminology related to race. A prominent example would be the terms that I have used to describe Black people. Eligon (2020) says the "terms in America for identifying black people have evolved over generations, from colored to Negro to black and African American. Also commonly used is 'people of color,' an umbrella term used to include many ethnic minorities." Based on the era, the phrase of the day was acceptable but would turn offensive during another period.

The N-word, a racist slur, continues to draw passionate debate on who uses it and how it is used. Some individuals and organizations, like the National Association for the Advancement

of Colored People (NAACP, 2014), have taken a concrete position that the term should never be used under any circumstances because of its dehumanizing history.

Others like Ta-Nehisi Coates (Random House, 2017) provide a more nuanced explanation of why some Black people still use the term. While he agrees that non-Black people should not use the N-word, he says that even with its negative connotation, some Black people use it as an insider term based on individuals' context and relationship.

In most business and professional settings, the N-word is typically not a word one would find used openly. But, in some schools, the word is used and causes race-based incidents (Anti-Defamation League, 2014). Educators who may want to teach the historical context of the word or use authentic literature but have no guidance or policies to provide safe parameters often create more harm. For the reasons cited by Coates, some Black students may use the term, confusing non-Black students about its appropriateness. In some cases, "N-word passes" are given by Black students to others, which lead to further confusion. It is essential for educators to understand how this derogatory terminology and other words associated with Black people have changed over time.

When Black people were brought to this country and enslaved, the N-word was the name given, assigned, and not permitted to dispute. During that time and today, this term is still used to denigrate Black people. During the eighteenth century, Negro was widely used. Because it was the standard convention, Fredrick Douglass, a well-known former slave and abolitionist, used the term to refer to himself and other Black people (Douglass, 2018). Starting in the nineteenth century through the mid-twentieth century, Black people were also referred to as "colored" people (Malesky, 2014). (This term is not to be confused with the contemporary phrase "people of color," which refers to all non-white people, including Black people. Currently, the term "colored people" is still considered offensive.)

However, during the Civil Rights era, many advocated to drop the terms Negro and colored and adopt the term Black. Malcolm X identified Negro as an oppressive term (Haley & Shabazz, 1989). He believed that the term Black was more empowering and instilled a needed sense of pride in Black people. Moving into the 1970s,

the term Afro-American was adopted by Black people to connect their lineage to the content of Africa. In the 1980s, the term African American became popular. Eligon (2020) says that historically, Black was also a way to refer to Black people. Even today, there is a push to capitalize the B in the word Black as it describes a people and a culture. I have opted to use the capital B in this book. What we do know is that wherever we land, it could still change based on the timing and whatever is happening at that moment.

TIMESCHANGE4METOO: HOW A HASHTAG UNSILENCED WOMEN OVER TIME

The #metoo movement began when, in 2017, Gen X actress Alyss Milano urged women who had been a victim of sexual assault to use the hashtag #metoo. This action went viral, with millions of women worldwide discussing and identifying with the trauma of being sexually assaulted. What most people did not know is that a Black woman, Tarana Burke, had introduced the term eleven years earlier to give voice to Black and Brown women who had suffered silently from sexual assault. Fortunately, Milano has worked alongside Burke to amplify the resistance against sexual violence to all people in vulnerable positions. This is a prime example of how details like timing and identity can make a difference.

Another example is the case of Anita Hill, a Black intellectual who notoriously testified against conservative Justice Clarence Thomas in 1991 during his Senate Supreme Court confirmation hearings (Mock, 2013). She experienced offensive and inappropriate treatment during her testimony about the sexual harassment she experienced when Judge Thomas supervised her during her time working at the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC). The country was riveted by Hill's live testimony in front of an all-male, all-white Senate Judiciary Committee that was combative and insensitive to her detailed account of sexual harassment inflicted by Judge Thomas. In the wake of her unplanned and unwanted notoriety, Hill became a tenured professor and remained obscure. After allowing her story to be documented in 2013, Hill shared what she had endured, noting that the timing was not right for the outrage that we see now. Women were less likely to come forth after they saw what Hill went through during and after the trials.

In her 2018 commencement speech for Wesleyan University, she admonished those in attendance by saying, "We cannot squander this moment," referring to the powerful timing of millions of voices drawing attention during the era of #metoo (MacNeill, 2019). Both Burke and Hill, two Black victims of sexual violence and harassment, remained vigilant and amplified the voice of those who suffer in silence. At the same time, Milano and numerous other white women with a broader platform used this "timing" aspect to broaden the message.

Timing was a factor in my own career when I appealed my no-tenure decision. At that time, no attorney wanted to take on my case because it was not common to challenge unfair tenure decisions. The tenure process had become highly protected over time. But in the fall of 2021, I received a call from someone at the state university's public governing board. The caller wanted to ask questions about my failed appeal because, of course, many others had come forward with similar claims of unfair and biased procedural practices. Doctoral students and other faculty had stepped forward in greater numbers after the watershed moment of George Floyd's murder. I had moved on with my life and did not want to open the past wounds by reengaging legal counsel or doing whatever was needed to seek justice. But it just showed me that sometimes, what is right may not be possible at the right time.

REFLECTION

How has the passage of time influenced the issues you are passionate about advocating for, particularly in terms of shifting societal norms or increased awareness?

Also, as an equity administrator, I was hired under a board resolution named after the Black Lives Matter movement. However, at the time, it was uncommon to say "Black Lives Matter" within the context of any school organization. The administration chose to focus more on the work called for by the resolution rather than the title of the resolution. Over time, through the grassroots efforts of some teachers and community activists, the district administration was moved to use the Black Lives

Matter at School Week to emphasize the work. The timing was better because others across the country were also holding space for Black Lives Matter within the context of education. At that point, activities were planned, and we even had a day set aside to wear BLM paraphernalia to school to celebrate the week's acknowledgment.

It is important to consider timing when moving your actions forward. There is absolutely nothing wrong with supporting and pushing unpopular actions forward in the name of justice. However, the work will be more difficult if the timing is wrong and there is not a broad understanding of the actions as necessary for equitable outcomes.

All this is complicated. And we haven't even started talking about the complexities of navigating equity. However, understanding your ICE-T (Identity, Context, Experiences, and Timing) is essential in your ability to push through the shades of gray to enact equity.

Questions to Consider

1. Describe your identity.
   a. What are "seen" or visible attributes?
   b. What are "unseen" or invisible attributes?
   c. What parts of your identity are most salient?
   d. What part of your identity do you think least about?
2. What experiences have you had because of your identity?
   a. What positive experiences have informed your feelings about advocating for yourself and others?
   b. What negative experiences have shaped your approach to advocating for yourself and others?
3. Describe the context of what you either want to do or are called to do to create more equitable outcomes.
4. Provide a timeline of the important events or context changes that have occurred in your equity work goals. How have things changed over time?