Reclaiming Racial Justice in Equity

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Twenty years ago, the Center for Urban Education (CUE) chose to focus on racial inequity as a problem driven by a lack of institutional accountability to students who were celebrated as symbols of diversity yet were not being as well served as their white counterparts. As the director of that research center, I can tell you that was not a message many people embraced at the time, but I am relieved today that "equity" has finally entered the dominant discourse of higher education (Anderson 2012).

It is particularly reassuring to read and hear the term "equity" now because not that long ago I was regularly discouraged from using it at all. Powerful stakeholders were wary of an agenda that was clearly about racial justice. They felt more at ease talking about diversity, inclusive excellence, or an equity focus that was based on low income.

But now it seems like "equity" is everywhere: we see the word used in statements of commitment on the websites of philanthropic foundations, in the missions of academic programs, in the goals of national educational reforms, and in programs aimed at improving college attainment and closing "achievement gaps," in state-level strategic plans, and in the brochures of mainstream higher education associations and the programs of their national conferences. Much to my surprise, I have even begun to come upon the term "equity-minded"—a term that CUE developed into five principles several years ago—in opinion pieces in Inside Higher Ed and in the descriptions and proposals of funded initiatives.

Equity, once viewed suspiciously as racially divisive and associated with the activism of social justice movements that academic purists disdain as "advocacy" work, is now being enthusiastically embraced on the academic scene.

But does this embrace of equity signify an embrace of its critical and anti-racist foundations? Or does the proliferation of this term instead represent the appropriation and dilution of equity?

As one of the authors generously invited to celebrate *Change*'s 50th Anniversary, I want to use this moment to confront these questions. I want to reclaim the racial justice focus that is the rightful meaning and intent of equity. This meaning and intent was advanced in the agendas of movements initiated by and for minoritized groups—Civil Rights,

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Black Panthers, Young Lords, Brown Berets, and SNCC—many of which reached prominence in 1968, the same year that *Change* was founded. I want to reclaim the "justice" focus in racial equity and equity-mindedness that characterizes the research and action agenda carried out at USC's Center for Urban Education as well as at USC's Center for Race and Equity.

The title of my essay is inspired by the phrase "reclaiming my time" that Representative Maxine Waters invoked to resist being silenced by Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin's diversionary tactics to run out the clock and not have to answer her questions on President Trump's financial ties to Russia. Representative Waters used a House procedural rule to resist silencing by a powerful white man, and her phrase "reclaiming my time" went viral. In the same spirit, I would like to confront the whitewashing of equity and reclaim the use of the word with fidelity to its anti-racist roots.

As it stands, the racial justice project represented by the term equity faces two threats. One is the total omission of race and whiteness in national higher education reforms that endeavor to move the college completion needle higher—towards some definition of success that is defined primarily by graduation rates. The second threat is the co-optation of equity and the erosion of its racial justice agenda. In a 1997 article published here in *Change*, Cliff Adelman warned, in a typical Adelmanian tone, that "we have pounded and bleached the word diversity into nothingness." I think that "equity" runs the same risk.

WHITENESS AS THE FOUNDATION FOR HIGHER EDUCATION REFORMS

The urgency around increasing the number of college-educated adults in the United States is generating millions of dollars to support a staggering array of policy and practice reforms. Using their networks of technical assistance providers, we see private foundations, intermediary organizations, and others experiment with alternative structures, curriculum, data practices, and professional development.

These experimental reforms often cite equity as a goal and come from people who have the very best of intentions; I know that they care about doing the right thing. They are devoting their best thinking to influence policies meant to create best practices, ones that they believe will provide clear, linear, economical, and efficient pathways to occupational certificates or degrees.

The rational solutions reflected in these reforms are targeted at community colleges and comprehensive four-year colleges that have high concentrations of students of color. These open and broad access institutions bear the greatest responsibility for fulfilling the American commitment to equal educational opportunity. Prescribing how to constrict choice in the curriculum so as to deliver a degree or certificate more efficiently, linearly, and cheaply (e.g., pathways), these reforms use computer-generated algorithms to match students to academic majors based on their academic predispositions; these practices comprise so-called "intrusive" advising.

Again, I know these "reforms," where the solution is better and more efficient structures, are being proposed and implemented with the best of intentions. But they remind me of reforms that once emerged from benevolent social scientists adhering to the pseudo-theory of the "culture of poverty."

Fifty years ago, white educators and policymakers came up with educational and social reforms that framed the problem of racial inequality as inherent cultural deficiencies attributed to Blacks in particular, but also Puerto Ricans in the East and Mexicans in the Southwest. While present day reforms do not pathologize Blacks as did Daniel Moynihan, Puerto Ricans as did Oscar Lewis, or Mexicans as did Samuel Huntington, the architecture of today's reforms are solutions borne out of mindsets that are predominantly male, white, and liberal—just as the reforms of 50 years ago. In the same way that the culture of poverty understandings produced remedies to fix the cultural and linguistic "shortcomings" of minoritized populations, present day reforms aim to fix the problem of racial inequity (although it is never described in these words) with behavior control measures such as intrusive counseling and predictive analytics.

As in all things, language matters. Intrusive counseling and advising as a practice means being pro-active in offering help and support to students who need it but don't seek it. But the word "intrusive" is troubling, particularly for minoritized populations, if the practitioner exercising intrusive advising lacks an understanding of how the role of whiteness and institutionalized racism are more significant impediments to students' success than their own behaviors.

Racial literacy also matters. Predictive analytics is based on algorithms that are not racially objective and that can privilege academic predispositions associated with whiteness. Racial expectations also matter. Intrusive advising and predictive analytics in the hands of individuals who perceive themselves to be color-blind or who are not fully conscious that instructor and student racial identities are implicated in academic outcomes could result in the misdiagnosis of the problem.

For example, advocates of predictive analytics illustrate its power by using as an example the student who is at risk of receiving a C in math which is predicted to earn him of her a D in chemistry. With the assistance of predictive analytics an advisor will reach out to the student and connect them with resources so that they can earn at least a B. For students of color a "C" might be indicative of deeper problems related to instructors' racial expectations, classroom climate, or experiences of microaggressions. Based on my experience working with predominantly white math faculty in colleges in California and Colorado I know that math performance is racialized.

Organization learning theorists, Chris Argyris and Donald Schön suggested long ago that organizational changes often fail to achieve their aspirations because they are designed to fix superficial symptoms and leave the cultural conditions (e.g. values, beliefs, norms) underlying dysfunctions intact. This is the problem that hampered the culture of poverty

solutions, and it is the problem I fear will stymie present-day color-blind reforms into which so much money and hope is being invested. Just as the reforms of 50 years ago did not problematize whiteness as the structural and cultural condition implicit in the production and maintenance of racial inequality, the trending reforms of today also fail to acknowledge whiteness in their assumptions, designs, and delivery.

Most of these national level reforms simply do not acknowledge racialization, racism, or whiteness, even as they avow a commitment to equity. These reforms insist on benefiting "all" students, even as the term "all" is not in line with equity work, nor does it typically lead white practitioners or policymakers to imagine specifically Black and Brown youths and adults. The reference to "all" students ignores that "color" has a social reality—meaning that "it produces real effects on the actors racialized as 'black' or 'white'" (Bonilla-Silva, 2006).

Based on my work with hundreds of faculty, administrators, and staff in all kinds of institutions of higher education, national reform efforts and subsidiary initiatives do not recognize that racial inequity is a central feature of the higher education system and the root problem that needs to be addressed.

To paraphrase David Gillborn (2005), reforms that are silent on race and racism and that are controlled by the values of whiteness can be considered as acts of white supremacy. White supremacy implies absolute control, feelings of superiority, or knowing what is best for minoritized groups (Leonardo, 2009). Absolute control and feelings of superiority, I realize, are neither overt nor obvious in the trending reforms, but if we consider who is leading the reforms, whose knowledge is privileged in the framing of the problem, and the resulting color-blind "solutions," white supremacy is an apt descriptor.

I know that, for many, white supremacy conjures horrific images of overt racism and violence, the Klu Klux Klan, or torch-bearing marchers on the grounds of the University of Virginia crying out "Hail Trump." But I am using the term "white supremacy" vis-a-vis higher education reforms to capture the reality of these reforms—they reflect whiteness in leadership, design, and implementation, and minoritized students represent their objects. To put it more colloquially, white supremacy represents the whiteness of who is at the table and the non-whiteness of who is on the menu, who is the agent and who is the object, who has power and who doesn't.

The problem of color-blind reforms is well-addressed by Amy Gutmann in her essay "Responding to Racial Injustice" (Gutman, 1996). She makes the point that when well-meaning people believe that color-blindness equates to being racially just, they are assuming an ideal society that has gotten past racism. We are not that society, and higher education is not an ideal institution for minoritized students. A critical race consciousness, therefore, is the only appropriate and necessary stance from which to address the consequences of whiteness as the ruling logic of higher education reforms and create genuine equity.

RECLAIMING THE RACIAL JUSTICE PROJECT IN EQUITY

As I mentioned above, the use of "equity" is trending, and at times it seems to be invoked as an emblem of liberal values and intentions before moving on to the real educational issue. "Equity," however, is much more than a word to be sprinkled into educational discourse like one might sprinkle salt to give seasoning to a bland meal. To meaningfully and intelligently talk about equity and equity-mindedness, we must be clear about the critical origins of these words.

Equity and equity-mindedness accept that it is whiteness—not the achievement gap—that produces and sustains racial inequality in higher education. The authentic exercise of equity and equity-mindedness requires explicit attention to structural inequality and institutionalized racism and demands system-changing responses.

Equity, as defined by the Center for Urban Education, is a two-dimensional concept. One axis represents institutional accountability that is demonstrated by the achievement of racial parity in student outcomes. Simply put, in a four-year institution whose student body is 25% Latinx, equity means that four and six years later, 25% of BA recipients will be Latinx. In a community college with a 15% Black student population, equity means that 15% of the students who transfer to the selective public flagship university will be Black. A clear prerequisite of any initiative that claims "equity" as one of its goals must be to incorporate racial proportionality in all educational outcomes, from degree attainment to participation in honors programs and internships in Fortune 500 companies.

Equity's second axis represents a critical understanding of the omnipresence of whiteness at the institutional and practice levels. Adopters of the term equity rarely acknowledge the racial justice meaning and agenda of equity. They do not see or know that whiteness circulates through structures, policies, practices, and values that are typically assumed to be fair and race-neutral. They may perceive that race is socially constructed, but they fail to see that being 'white,' 'black,' and 'brown' represent political and social realities that show up in the distribution of power, in who gets to sit at the table, in who gets hired or judged as qualified, and so on.

Equity-mindedness in principle and practice is fundamental to the exercise of equity. An equity-minded approach raises consciousness of the need to consider equity in connection with historical and political understandings of racial stratification (Bensimon, Dowd, and Witham, 2016). Equity-mindedness is demonstrated in the following ways:

- Being color-conscious in a critical sense. This means noticing and questioning patterns of educational outcomes that reveal differences in outcomes for minoritized students; it means viewing racial inequalities in the context of educational apartheid. It also means noticing who is included (and left out) in the making of policies and decisions that will impact minoritized groups.

- Being cognizant that racism is produced through everyday practices (Essed,1991). Rather than viewing inequalities as unfortunate but not surprising, equity-mindedness recognizes that inequalities might be created or exacerbated by taken-for-granted practices and policies, inadequate knowledge, a lack of race-consciousness, and unwillingness to give up control. Responsibility for racial equity is exemplified by asking: "Why are our practices failing to assist racially minoritized students?" "In what ways might policies contribute to the formation of unequal racial outcomes?" "Why is it that our experts are all white?"
- Being aware of racial identity, as well as racialized beliefs, expectations, and practices. This means understanding that identity is influenced by the racial/ethnic group to which one belongs and that actions could have a racial impact, sometimes unintended.

Experience has taught me that equity-mindedness does not come naturally. It requires a knowledge base. It takes a lot of practice. Generally, practitioners and leaders lack the knowledge to notice who, by race and ethnicity, benefits from opportunity structures and who loses out. There is limited awareness of how race and racism are expressed through language; or how race is implicated in curricular choices; or in the ordinary routines in an assessment center or student orientation; or in what data are made public and what data are suppressed.

Until the 1960's, inequality was planned and intentional, engineered and reinforced through racially discriminatory policies. Today, we run the risk of perpetuating and increasing inequality not through such intentional acts but by not interrupting whiteness in reforms and by the uncritical appropriation of equity.

While I remain gratified and encouraged by the growing acceptance and usage of equity by those with a desire to improve our educational system, I find it difficult to stand by as the term grows so ubiquitous as to lose its real meaning—and to stand for something good but completely amorphous to many that use it.

And so please understand—I am writing today to reclaim this word. Equity has a very strong and distinct meaning. It is rooted in achieving racial proportionality in all educational outcomes and in critically assessing whiteness at the institutional and practice levels. It is about acknowledging and addressing racism in our educational systems. It is a word, at its core, that seeks the kind of racial justice that groups were fighting for 50 years ago when *Change* was founded.

I hope you will join with me in reclaiming our word, and in supporting *Change* for another 50 years. C

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