SHIFTING SELF AND SYSTEM

How Educational Leaders Propel Excellence for Achieving Equity

Dr. Ruby Ababio-Fernandez
Courtney Winkfield

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Introduction

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> "We do not inherit the earth from our ancestors; we borrow it from our children."
>
> —African Proverb

The past three years brought us all to a grinding halt as the Covid-19 health pandemic imposed a global quarantine in every corner of the world. While living under lockdown, many of us were forced to confront illness, grief, and job loss. At the same time, our entire nation, and world, witnessed the murder of George Floyd at the hands of a police officer, captured through the lens of a bystander's smartphone. This tragedy sparked a racial reckoning, a call for justice, and an affirmation that Black lives did indeed matter. Its repercussions spread through the country like an insatiable wildfire, as the truth of human injustice had been laid bare—at least for those of us willing to accept that reality.

Many Americans were reminded that across cultures and generations our existence has been undergirded by a belief in "a fixed and embedded ranking of human value that sets the presumed supremacy of one group against the presumed inferiority of other groups on the basis of ancestry and often immutable traits" (Wilkerson, 2020, p. 16). Such beliefs have long been upheld as the rationale for dehumanization of Black Americans. Our collective eyes, in the face of mass deaths and fragile mortality, were challenged in ways that provoked a reckoning of our consciousness. In the days and weeks following Floyd's murder, massive peaceful protests erupted across the country demanding justice,

most urgently through substantial police reform. Industries and sectors across the country began grappling with the urgent inequities in their own respective houses. Corporate CEOs made commitments to "listen and learn" and assemble task forces to increase diversity in hiring practices and organizational and workplace cultures. Major retailers such as Ann Taylor and Gap flooded our emails with "We Stand With George" and "Black Lives Matter" subject headings.

Much in the way that previous protest movements gradually lost momentum, the protests that commenced during the summer of 2020 gradually subsided while the Covid-19 pandemic raged on. Summer turned to fall, and for educators, our focus turned to school reopening, remote instruction, and access to technology. However, the pandemic also revealed and exacerbated long-standing educational inequities and, more specifically, racial disparities, in an unprecedented manner.

Using assessment data from the fall of 2020, the McKinsey Group showed that students of color were, on average, three to five months behind where we would expect them to be in mathematics, while White students were only one month behind. While conditions showed slight improvement in the spring of 2021, largely as a result of the release of vaccines, Black and Brown students continued to "be more likely to remain remote and less likely to have access to the prerequisites of learning—devices, internet access and live contact with teachers" (Dorn et al., 2020, para. 4). The potential for multigenerational impact of this moment was highlighted in examples like the New York State report on the ripple effects of the pandemic on children. The report illustrated the severe consequences of economic insecurity on families with children under 18 years of age. Findings from the study indicated that without a high level of resources and focused interventions, over 300,000 children, particularly those of color, could suffer long-term impact from child poverty, including mental health, disruption of education, and their overall well-being (Brundage & Ramos-Callan, 2020).

These reports, and many others across the country, continued to present grim realities for students, especially those in vulnerable communities that are Black, Brown, and Indigenous. The conditions forced many school systems to evaluate their efforts, both pre-pandemic and in preparation for reopening, as well as to address long-standing racial

disparities. The twin pandemics, both racial and viral, of 2020 and 2021 brought us to a call-to-action: address deeply rooted issues of equity *now* in all aspects of education.

The mass response to this call to action was palpable. Many believed that this was our generation's turning point of recasting this moment into a more just, humane planet and country. It was our moment to seize the wrongs of centuries and bend the arc toward a history that finally lived up to the better of our angels and humanity. We were finally fully justified to address inequities that have plagued us socially and across our schools and classrooms. Whether by will or pressure from the moment's uncertainties and cries for being on the right side of humanity, reflections from school districts resulted in countless public declarations in service of creating more equitable systems for students in the wake of health, educational, and racial pandemics unfolding in our country. And as a tendency of education, the saturation of equity-focused initiatives began to flood social media, websites, and emails.

However, the pandemic also allowed for substantive opportunities for critical examination of existing practices that could result in more equitable learning experiences and outcomes. One facet of education that was long overdue for some reconsideration had been grading policies. Thousands of school districts, in the midst of the massive shift to remote learning, began to question the purpose of grading policies set for students' course requirements, graduation, and more importantly, assessing learning. Similarly, the traditional criteria for college applications were also upended by this pandemic. This led to colleges making decisions to remove SAT/ACT tests from their list of requirements and shifting the weight of testing as a primary indicator for the admissions process—a long-standing practice that not only failed to reveal students' academic potential but disproportionately penalized students of color. Another area that districts wrestled with was understanding how curricula requirements prioritize certain values over others. In particular, how do districts address the issues of race, power, and oppression that mirror many of our students' and communities' lived experiences? California, in mandating ethnic studies courses, provides a great example of how a district or entire state can call upon its students to positively impact our world by learning the stories of members of diverse ethnicities and cultures who

contributed to the history of this nation—particularly those groups that have been erased from so many mainstream history curricula.

Some state agencies, school districts, and communities began moving toward sustainable strategies to disrupt inequitable policies and practices such as disciplinary actions and access to curriculum. Others sought to build the collective consciousness of educators by sensitizing them to their implicit biases and beliefs that stand in the way of forming positive relationships with students of color. But as with so many promising "openings" in history, this moment was quickly met with a new, albeit predictable, barrier: an assault on the truth that, most recently, has taken the form of intense backlash against "critical race theory" in K–12 education.

For those readers who are unfamiliar with critical race theory (CRT), take comfort in knowing that you are not alone, especially since critical race theory is not (and never was) taught in public schools, contrary to the opinions of right-wing state legislators, pundits, and their followers who have led the attack. Rather, it is a body of scholarship that emerged from legal studies and explores the way that race functions in our institutions, systems, and policies. But facts don't necessarily matter in the court of this particular public opinion. Like so many other surreal manifestations of our post-truth era, in a matter of just a few short months, the leaders of the backlash convinced a large swath of the country that K–12 educators were hell-bent on brainwashing students into believing that all White people are bad and racist and that America was evil. By the summer of 2021, ten states had passed anti-CRT legislation, with another 20 states in line to pass similar policies. Ironically, and importantly, almost none of these laws even mention critical race theory. Instead, these pieces of legislation ban "the discussion, training, and/or orientation that the U.S. is inherently racist as well as any discussions about conscious and unconscious bias, privilege, discrimination, and oppression. These parameters also extend beyond race to include gender lectures and discussions" (Ray & Gibbons, 2021, para. 5). In many cases, some of these bans include anti-social-emotional learning–related curricula and content. This backlash in the face of real progress is intended to tie the hands of districts and schools as they try, and fail, and try again to address long-standing and complex racial inequities. In short, the perpetrators of the backlash are attempting to set the course for a disruptive, often fear-induced,

approach to doing the work of our generation. This is not new to our human experience nor this country's shadowy existence.

From Hopeful Moments to Dreams Deferred

We've been at this crossroads before—countless times, in fact. Those of us who dare to believe that our world can be just and equitable have learned to recognize and understand these cycles of dysfunction. In fact, success in our pursuit of justice and equity relies on our ability to consolidate lessons from our history and ancestors that have taught us how to collectively and historically respond to our most urgent calls for educational equity, together!

There are many examples and guideposts in the history and evolution of this country's search for its soul. We can reflect on how the postslavery 19th century Reconstruction Era provides a glimpse into the narrative arc for the challenges we face in this moment. Historian Clarence Walker describes efforts of African Americans mobilizing for the education of their children as a "revolutionary act" on the part of newly freed slaves who saw the potential of education as a means toward obtaining the rights owed them as American citizens. "They understood that slavery had deprived them of a number of the tools that marked you as an American citizen; and that it was necessary, if they were to take their place as free people within the Union, that they have the rudiments and more than the rudiments of education to survive" (American Archive of Public Broadcasting, n.d.). In the decade to follow, Blacks and Whites moved through society in mostly integrated spaces. The subsidies set aside for the Freedmen's Bureau allowed for the development of schools for newly freed African Americans. And as progress grew, so did the resistance to this newfound freedom from many Whites across the country and in Southern states in particular. When President Andrew Johnson openly criticized the Bureau's efforts, the brief period of peaceful progress quickly gave way to racial violence in the South and apathy in the North. As Whites morphed the Democratic party into a staunch defender of White supremacy, terrorist organizations like the Ku Klux Klan used threats and violence to impede Black progress. By the time Reconstruction ended in the late 1870s, the Democratic Party had regained all control of the South. And as *Plessy vs. Ferguson* cemented legal segregation and ushered in the era of Jim Crow laws, the legacy of segregation became more and more entrenched.

Then again in the mid-20th century, we see yet another period of hopefulness as the landmark ruling of *Brown vs. Board of Education* in 1954 declared school-based racial segregation as unconstitutional. But the backlash that ensued from this monumental decision ensured that, in most cases, the status quo was maintained. When federal authorities began enforcing the law of the land late into the 1950s and early 1960s, many White communities took matters into their own hands. Scholars estimate that, across the nation, at least half a million White students were withdrawn from public schools between 1964 and 1975 to avoid mandatory desegregation.

Still, more than four decades after these segregation academies were established, the legacy of their efforts persists. A report from *Atlantic* magazine on the legacy of *Brown v. Board* found that

> public schools are nearly as segregated as they were in the
> late 1960s . . . in many areas, they are rapidly resegregating
> as federal desegregation orders end. White families continue
> to flee schools following large influxes of poor or minority
> students. And in Indianola, as in the rest of the country,
> there's stark disagreement as to why: Whites often cite
> concerns over school quality, while [B]lacks are more likely to
> cite the persistence of racism. (Carr, 2012, para. 8)

The latter half of the 20th century saw a move away from integration efforts as a strategy to address systemic educational inequalities. Instead, we experienced the doubling down of federal mandates, from Reagan's "A Nation at Risk" to Bush's "No Child Left Behind"; standardized testing as a measure to standardize a quality education; and the birth of ubiquitous terms like "at-risk" to describe students (mostly Black and Brown) and "failing" to describe schools (mostly those that serve Black and Brown students). These efforts ushered us into the age of the "achievement gap" which led to pervasive beliefs that the wide disparity in student outcomes was somehow a result of inherent deficits in certain groups of students, particularly Black and Brown students, who consistently performed below their White and Asian counterparts, typically based on a single data point: the results of end-of-year "high-stakes" assessments. The "remedy" to what was commonly framed as deficits was watered-down, remedial

instruction, which in many cases, led to even more nefarious inequity actions through academic segregation. We saw the rise of hyper-leveling as a tool to address academic performance disparities, which resulted in a cementing of tracking as a tool to ensure certain students have access to accelerated learning opportunities like gifted and talented, AP, and honors courses.

Neutrality Is Not an Option for Transformational Leaders

Yes, we've been here before, and the shape has and continues to shift to reflect the depth and permanence of racial injustice in the American bone marrow. How often have we seen the most ardent proponents of justice become groups paralyzed with fear, the kind that breaks the psyche? For many equity leaders, these fears permeate their everyday lives, as they risk being targeted, marginalized, or losing livelihoods, all in the fight to do right by underserved communities, primarily Black, Brown, and Indigenous.

In the height of another pandemic—the AIDS pandemic—a group of activists chanted a rallying cry that was also a stern warning: "Silence = Death." Much in the same way, we have learned that silence and inaction in the face of injustice can kill the purest and most righteous of movements. We are at a time of our human history in which we are confronted with many existential questions, beginning with this: *What is our purpose as human beings*? What happens when we extend such a question to our current roles? In our work as educational equity leaders, we have heard a consistent call from our colleagues that is a variation of such a question: *How do I **lead** this equity work in the way I'm being asked?* This question is often followed by another slightly focused on self-preservation: *How do I maintain a level of neutrality while doing work for educational justice*? At this point, we are forced to face an uncomfortable truth: Equity work, by its very nature, cannot be enacted while maintaining a neutral stance. At the same time, we don't advocate waving flags or shouting through a megaphone that you are an equity warrior. In fact, we find that such actions often counter progress. However, it is imperative to maintain a consistent focus—swiftness and unapologetic precisive focus on creating equitable outcomes and experiences that match the challenge of the moment we're in.

The stakes could not be higher. We cannot afford to wait, stay neutral, be silent, or go through the motions of leading ineffective, ambiguous, or merely performative equity work alone. We risk producing another generation of young people who will grow into adulthood unwilling or unable to talk about race, of generations of young people not understanding the truth of our history or how that history shapes everything about their daily lives in continuing cycles of progress for some and backlash and deprivation for others. We risk perpetuating oppression, dehumanization, and most importantly, we risk the depletion and extinguishing of a generation's soul.

We're at another turn of human reckoning that each generation before us had to resolve for themselves: to choose to show up in service of advancing our collective humanity. And so, we must move through. We must be willing to sustain the discomfort and disequilibrium that comes with engaging adaptive challenges that have no easy or quick answers. We must be willing and able to take the long view from 30,000 feet and the ground view from 5 feet simultaneously and remain committed to the work of our lifetime—even when confronted by backlash.

We must also acknowledge the power of collectivity and that the risk of staying in silos also serves as a function of White supremacy. Our counternarrative to working in silos is recognizing and leveraging our interdependence at the racial, strategic, and human level countermove. Collaboration in the interest of enacting a common vision of equitable schools fuels and sustains the ability to create a more just world. Achieving this vision also calls upon us to identify and dismantle tools that maintain the status quo, even when they are masked as something else. And accepting that when real progress is made, through intentional, systemic changes in policy, structure, and people—whether through efforts to provide greater access to advanced coursework, to revise curriculum so that it is more culturally responsive, or to build the collective capacity of educators and communities to unpack bias and its impact on teaching and learning—the backlash will be waiting. We must understand, lift up, learn from, and implement historical lessons from *radical leaders* of the past and carefully study the blueprints they left for us to take on the work of our lifetime. Transformational leadership is what this moment requires—leadership that is rooted in deep knowledge, innovation, and change undergirded by understanding that advancement is achieved from the inside out. Understanding that our human progress

is integrally tied to reseeing how we work with others—people we may have never encountered before or, in some cases, even like to work with.

Whether you're a new leader assuming greater responsibilities or are seasoned in your practice, at this point in your leadership journey the moment's ask for our generation is enormous: Take actions that disrupt oppressive systems denying excellence to Black and Brown children. But what if your current go-to leadership moves and thoughts are the very things standing in the way of real change? What if the challenge requires focus on not just performance but on harnessing the courageous efforts of self and others, in an unyielding push for being, doing, and showing up with fortitude? What if our current challenge relies on leaders who understand how to leverage deep knowledge, will, empathy, resilience, and understanding collective strength, capacity, and heightened consciousness to lead through adaptive challenges that contribute substantially to better outcomes for marginalized children and communities—our humanity?

And this is where we extend a sound invitation for our colleagues—you—to lean in and journey with us.

As former school leaders, coaches, and system-level leaders, outside and in the nation's largest school district, we have wrestled firsthand with navigating the thrill that comes from thinking we know the answers, having tried-and-true strategies that, much like the teacher who dusts off the beloved unit or lesson plans, lead us to predictable outcomes. We have lived leadership on the "path of least mess" because it's easiest in resolution, provides consistent closure, and quite frankly, there's no time or no one pausing long enough to explore a different possibility forward toward innovation and transformation. We have been leaders stuck in a recycled frame that does not serve to actualize sustainable outcomes for our students, communities, and the larger world. Like many of our colleagues, we, too, have been stuck in stagnation. We don't claim to have the quick fix or checklist, perfect recipe, or magical fairy dust ordaining you an equity leader or warrior.

On the contrary, our collective experience of over 40 years has taught us one thing: Leadership is messy, dynamic with challenges that can often feel like navigating a minefield. The higher we climb, the more we internalize exactly what we must do to ensure a "successful" outcome. Yet our

tried-and-true moves have another side to them and can just as easily become our defaults. While these defaults (security blanket strategies) ensure some semblance of control over process and outcome, they also lead to a cycle of surface, technical achievements that fall short of the transformation impact we hope to achieve. Again, we don't claim to have *the* answer to the questions; however, we have culled our combined 40 years of experience in leadership, change management, strategy, coaching, and policy design to share our successes, failures, and cautionary tales learned in many roles and educational settings, including helping to design and lead the largest equity agenda ever in the nation's largest school district.

We've learned that disrupting systems that fail Black and Brown children requires school and systems leaders who are increasingly hungry to cultivate consciousness through disciplined study of the history and impact of race and education in this country. At the same time, much of what stops leaders from stepping into their full potential as *equity* leaders is a false belief that, without a complete and total understanding of the very thing we just mentioned, they have no place *leading* the work. We acknowledge the importance of racial equity content, especially having a social–historical context of race in education. We also place equal importance on understanding the power of adaptive leadership development, collective problem-solving, and whole body healing. We offer a conceptual framework that, with synthesis and implementation of five key pillars of practice—self mastery, adaptive leadership, racial literacy, emergence, and healing activation—supports leaders in developing the critical tools necessary to push boundaries, transform policies and systems, and develop human capacity that impacts outcomes for students in meaningful and lasting ways. Each one of these pillars on its own helps to address aspects of complex problems riddled with historical factors that constantly shift to mirror the moment in time. The pillars enable leaders to create conditions that serve as antidotes to race neutrality, mediocrity, and technical unexamined responses.

Through our individual and collective stories, scenarios, and case studies, we offer hard-learned insights and strategies to overcome spiraling into stagnation and avoid cycles of dysfunctional equity work. Our strategies are offered as an "inside-out" approach—or, as we often refer to it as a borrowed term of "mirror-window" work. We share our own

personal journey of discovering ourselves in the work and describe the impacts that only occur once a leader begins to truly see themselves as a central focus of the work. Through these experiences, we will weave an ongoing thread that illustrates the false markers of success or arrival—these shape-shifter moments intended to make you think you have arrived—when, in reality, the gains are thin or token at best, ensuring the systems' return to status quo in no time. Understanding the predictable pattern of these false markers is essential to predicting potential outcomes and targeting strategy for desired impact. And the more you invest in understanding and healing yourself, in building muscle to stand centered in the disequilibrium, the more equipped you are to navigate these patterns, serving to clear paths for generations to follow who will have fewer traumas to heal as they chart their own path in advancing efforts of social justice. Through intentional braiding of these pillars, systems, and individuals can be disrupted and reoriented in precise service to transformational equity. Without focus and equal attention to these pillars in a leader's and systems development, we believe change will continue to succumb to long historical and predictable patterns of failure like most equity work.

Our work together unfolds in chapters as follows:

1. ***Introduction***—We frame our premise for why *this* book and particularly *now* for bold and transformative leadership, and we establish our pillars as part of our invitation to address current dilemmas in leading for racial equity.

2. ***Pillar One: The Journey to Self-Mastery***—We share our paths to education and our process for discovering an inside-out approach through our leadership stories—stories that on the surface couldn't be more different but became connected in service of excellence.

3. ***Pillar Two: Adaptive Leadership***—We explore the core principles of adaptive leadership, especially building the tolerance for discomfort that replaces the allure of technical quick fixes, often ever-present in checklist equity efforts. We introduce our learning about the inside-out approach as a precondition necessary for leading complex change with a racially conscious lens.

4. ***Pillar Three: The Training Chase: Pitfalls and Possibilities of Equity Work***—We focus on the important, but often overemphasized, pursuit of acquiring racial equity training. Our lens and schema inform how we interpret everything in education, from policy to quantitative data to conversations with students or families. Understanding what informs our unique schema, especially when rooted in an inside-out approach to unpacking the impact of race on our lives, builds the necessary lens to resee what has always been right in front of us with the goal of removing and replacing biased beliefs with ones that are culturally competent.

5. ***Pillar Four: Emergence: Focusing on the Power of the Collective***—In education, all too often, the crisis of the day drives the pace and the scale of strategy. This pattern often leads to a never-ending cycle of urgency over competency at the expense of collective impact and sustainability. Since the onset of public education, a "divide and conquer" approach has been the dominant way of being—from discrete subject areas to siloed divisions in policymaking. Understanding causes and relationships between elements contributing to problems and those poised to ensure most effective solutions provides greater clarity for sustainable outcomes. Emergence offers us an important lesson in the way complex strategy arises out of small, meaningful spaces of incubation and from stakeholders often indigenous to the issues. This is a necessary frame for disrupting the long-standing tenant of White culture, which often breeds silos and rewards competition. We offer important lessons for how we collectively create change.

6. ***Pillar Five: Mastering Healing for a Better Humanity***—Although we come to the work through the intellectual space, our very DNA arrives, in many cases, with generations of harm and unhealed trauma. An effective racial equity leader requires a disciplined approach to healing as a source of sustainability. Driving the distance of the work from generation to generation relies on a relentless pursuit of healing and wholeness in the

deepest way. We focus on the impact of somatic, mind-body-soul/spirit awareness on personal and professional levels.

7. ***Epilogue: The Only Way Through Is Through***—We share our final thoughts about what is and has been possible in this work when there's a shared purpose and mission, even when the path forward is murky, tough, and unclear.

We explore these essential pillars for transformation and how each plays out for the self (for the leader) and for the collective (for the team/other stakeholders) through our own lived experiences as well as through vignettes from leader-colleagues across the country.

Contained within these chapters are additional resources and reflections for individual learning experiences. Each chapter concludes with key considerations to guide you along your journey. These salient learnings come from our collective almost half a century's worth of learning, both successes and failures that have defined our understanding of what is necessary to advance issues of equity in real and lasting ways. We have also offered intentional opportunities to deepen your learning at the end of each pillar through Extended Learning exercises. The Independent Practice section is filled with reflection exercises to help you assess your own understanding and engage in opportunities to deepen your own personal learning around the chapter's content. In the Collaborative Practice section, we offer you case studies that lift up key problems of practice aligned to the chapter's pillar. Our case studies are powerful invitations to extend the learning into critical dialogue with partners and colleagues in the work. We encourage you to use the experiences within the case studies to provoke curiosity and self-reflection and, most importantly, conversation. Each case study comes with a set of aligned reflection questions to spark, but not limit, your discussion. Please note that Pillars One and Five do not come with additional stand-alone case studies, as we offer our own lived experiences within these two chapters as a source of learning and reflection. It is our hope that these conversations, both with yourself and with others, will inspire reflection, learning, deeper questions, and, ultimately, a shift in action.

Icons Used in This Book

SECTION	ADINKRA SYMBOL	SYMBOL NAME	SYMBOL MEANING
Core Considerations		Nea onnim no sua a ohu	"Who does not know can know from learning" Knowledge, Education
Independent Practice		Akoma ntoso	"Linked hearts" Understanding
Collaborative Practice		Ese ne tekrema	"The teeth and the tongue" Friendship, Interdependence

Icon source: iStock.com/iSidhe