NATIONAL CENTER on Inclusion Toward Rightful Presence

Realizing Rightful Presence Through Justice-Oriented Leadership

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I am Dr. Dibblee, a Latina, bilingual, first-generation immigrant who has served as a teacher, school, and district leader for 27 years. Reflecting on those years, a common theme emerged with each new leadership role: an “in the door” challenge to respond to the urgency of doing education work and the need to intentionally build relationships to enable that work. At these crossroads I learned to lean into equity as a driver to meeting both challenges and laying a foundation for ongoing success for educators and students.

While the aims of inclusive education represent progress for many students who have been excluded or marginalized, implementation remains elusive in our nation’s educational context (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023). Experiences and research shared in this article intend to show that when implementation moves from inclusive educational practices to the construct of equity through rightful presence, those aims can be realized. We tell the story of a justice-oriented leader and educators with the will, knowledge, and

support to explore and commit to creating a culture in which each student knows they are valued and cared for, and an equity strategy that ensures better outcomes for all student groups. We follow Dr. Dibblee and her team's multi-year journey of systematic implementation rooted in equity.

The Beginning: Understanding Inequity

After 17 years in education, six in administration, I was appointed principal of a dual language immersion elementary school. The school was home to over 400 students, of whom 44% were BIPoC, 41% were economically disadvantaged, 18% were identified for special education, and 19% spoke other languages and were learning English. Most of my experience was at the secondary level, with limited experience in elementary. I was the third principal of this school in as many years, and the school community was in turmoil. It operated with three strands: (1) neighborhood children in general education, (2) children from throughout the district in dual language immersion, and (3) students with disabilities served by an intensive skills program. The school felt divided into very separate environments—schools within a school; the staff was fractured; and more trust was needed within the school and broader

community. As the school's new leader, it was apparent to me that reparation and restoration needed to happen.

Additionally, at the time, the federally funded SWIFT Center began a partnership with my state's education agency to provide technical assistance to implement inclusive educational systems, and my school was selected as an implementation site. As I asked myself whether to hold back and focus on relationships or to begin to take action in response to the urgent student needs, this partnership was positioned at the nexus of the two challenges. By pursuing equity with attention to inclusive education, we forged positive relationships through teaming structures and we were able to guide actions to meet students' urgent needs.

Practice Rooted in Research

Dr. Dibblee led one of 64 schools that participated in an intentional redesign process for the purpose of including students historically excluded or left at the margins because they learn, communicate, or function differently than students in the dominant culture. The redesign process was rooted in a framework derived from more than forty years of inclusive education research and practice (Sailor et al., 2017; SWIFT

Education Center, 2016). The framework was necessary to provide a vision of "what" inclusive education could be, but not sufficient to implement that vision. Studies showed that the "how" of becoming such a school was just as important as the "what" for realizing improved student outcomes. Through structural equation modeling, researchers found that effective implementation of inclusive academic and behavioral systems is mediated by technical assistance to increase school capacity in *administrative leadership* ($\chi^2(3) = 0.49$, $p = .92$; CFI = 1.0; Tucker–Lewis index (TLI) = 1.1; RMSEA = 0.0, $p = .94$, 90% CI = [0.000, 0.075]) (Choi et al., 2019). When schools are able to increase this capacity, they can expect better implementation of the framework for inclusive education and experience corresponding increases in student achievement on annual state assessments of reading and math (Kozleski & Choi, 2018).

Administrative leadership in this context is defined by two features: *justice-oriented leaders* and *well supported educator teams*. Justice-oriented educational leaders are those committed to a justice mission. They have a sense of themselves that moves them "past typical patterns of behavior based on societal expectations and moves them inward toward a place of knowing and understanding themselves" (McCart et al., 2023, p. 111). They have a sense of how others contribute to their own formation, and of how they must come together with others in solidarity and understanding of students in their school to advance justice and achieve student growth. Such leaders value and celebrate every person

associated with their schools and believe in the strengths, talents and wisdom of their educator teams. They are resolved in their commitment to justice and persistent in the face of challenges, knowing that system changes can require new discoveries and typically take years to implement (Fixsen et al., 2005).

Beyond these dispositional characteristics, justice-oriented leaders think and act systemically to redesign and transform their school ecosystems for students to thrive and grow (McCart et al., 2023). They anticipate and prepare for technical complexity as well as adaptive issues related to changes in beliefs, roles, relationships, and approaches to work (Heifetz et al., 2009). They inspire and draw their educational community—families, educators, and students—into the work of creating the schools they hope to have (McCart). They use traditional and non-traditional data to increase understanding and guide decisions; set clear expectations for students' social growth and academic achievement; and provide a positive, supportive and uplifting environment for educators. Leaders, such as Dibblee, recognize when reparations are needed in order to help school communities heal and come together in a collective vision.

Justice-oriented leaders ensure well supported educator teams as well. These teams are grade-level and content-area educators working together with specialized educators and service providers. As those who are closest to students day-to-

day, they have the “hands on” assignment of operationalizing ideals of equity-driven schooling and are most central to establishing justice in schools.

Fast Forward: Three Years Later

On a typical morning I did a walkthrough of a second-grade classroom during their foundational skills block. Students worked in pairs and practiced decoding and fluency skills. I joined two students working together. One, a Black male, was leading the activity, and his white female partner sat in her wheelchair listening. I sat to hear their collaboration. The male student articulated two words and then

asked his partner, “Do these rhyme?” She would make a movement, and then he shared praise. Not having observed them work together before, I asked, “How do you know what her answer is if she cannot verbally tell you?” He casually answered, “Her head touches the switch to the right when it is a rhyming word and to the left if it is not,” and then returned to their activity. While rhyming is not necessarily a second-grade standard, this activity codified the standards for the female student. For her, this task provided meaningful engagement with a peer and the general education curriculum. Meanwhile, he did not miss a beat working on his grade level standard as he vocalized words he was learning to decode with fluency. Soon their teacher cued the students to change partners, and new pairs engaged in the next activity. I realized then that we had settled into equity as the way in which we operated. Equity was part of our systems, practices, and data and the driving force for our work.

The Work: Building Equity Educators

Throughout the first year we worked within two teaming structures to build relationships and guide action. We leveraged a district initiative

that previously established an Equity Team that included teachers and an educational assistant. Together, we focused on leading professional development on our “late start Wednesdays” to build community. Every staff member attended, and small groups took turns contributing to our “potluck breakfast.” We shared a meal, analyzed data, and created plans to support students.

During these teacher-led professional development sessions, important “ah-ha’s” and culture shifting moments happened among the staff. For example, when some staff were complaining about the behavior of students in our third grade dual language immersion class, their teacher—a person of color—shared her perspective. She was hurt by how these adults talked about the children she serves, particularly because they were the most racially and linguistically diverse class in the school. As a result, we made the class our focus as we examined our biases. Instead of talking about their deficits, every adult in the school identified these students’ “assets.” We changed our narrative about who these students are, and resisted contributing to sustaining negative stereotypes.

The second critical team was a new SWIFT Team, which later became the Climate Team. It included two teachers, the speech pathologist, school counselor, school psychologist, reading specialist (who also oversaw the English Language Program), and learning center specialists for special education. We knew we had work to do after scoring a 0 on the first organizational assessment comparing the way we worked to the evidence-based practices in the SWIFT framework. We analyzed our systems and engaged in technical assistance using a Priority and Practice Planning process (SWIFT, 2020). We chose to prioritize inclusive behavior instruction and, therefore, to implement Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS). We also researched curriculum for social-emotional learning, set systems in a high-activity area (i.e., the playground), and set methods for student recognition.

While staff throughout the school felt the momentum of these efforts, we still needed to establish more connectedness because staff still felt hurt over prior years' experiences. With all of the changes, we decided it was imperative to go through a visioning process that would bring their voices to the forefront and find a

way to articulate what inclusion meant to us and our school. In our community, inclusion was synonymous with equity and about who was in our building and how everyone belonged.

Rightful Presence

By focusing on inclusion as a means to achieving equity, Dibblee and her teams instinctively enacted what several educational scholars describe as "rightful presence" (Calabrese Barton & Tan, 2020; McCart et al., 2023). Rightful presence in education is about co-creating an environment conducive to learning and personal growth through cultivation of a culture of true belonging for students and educators who historically are treated like "guests" in a system designed to serve a dominant or "host" culture. Students whose intersecting race, culture, language, and ability too often experience disenfranchisement in schools to the extent that "inclusion efforts alone cannot bring about substantial change because they adhere to the same guest/host power dynamic that serves to normalize the existence of a group who is invited and a group with the power to invite" (McCart et al., 2023, p. 22). The environment Dibblee observed on her classroom walkthrough is a good example of true belonging that many families hope for their children to experience and that school

leaders wish they could implement. This belonging can manifest in countless ways, such as:

- a student with significant, fragile medical needs optimizes time in core instruction in general education by accessing the classroom break space to regulate and then return to whole group activities
- all classrooms have desks for each student, ensuring those whose support requires short periods of transition to other spaces are able to seamlessly re-enter and join their grade level peers
- educators organize classroom space and activities such that, when entering the room, one cannot identify which students spend less than 100% of time there
- school specialists read social stories to normalize variability among students, especially in race, culture, language, and ability
- district and school purchase and maintain assistive technology to allow students to engage with learning at their levels in a general education setting (e.g., response switch technology in vignette above)
- family and community partners bring their cultures into school through celebrations that represent the multitude of cultures and by building a playground that is fun and safe for students who use wheelchairs to play with their peers

The Work: Vision Toward Justice

Opening a school year allows the opportunity to (re)set the tone for our work. In my second year we engaged in protocols to review our mission and develop a vision. We centered on the diversity of our students and their unique needs and gifts. The protocols were designed to enhance the buy-in and commitment of everyone in our community. First the school team brainstormed: “What does our ‘dream school’ look like? What behaviors, actions, and instructional practices would we see?” Next we created three vision statements and, in subsequent weeks, engaged students and community members in selecting our vision statement. Communication and voting began on Back-to-School Night and continued during drop-off and pick-up times to engage family members. We translated the statements into various languages to ensure we reached our multilingual community. Students also discussed the statements during school and voted. This approach to selecting a vision unified our school community to commit and work toward a common purpose.

With a vision statement and the two teams in place, we settled on finding guidance by reviewing a Data Snapshot of our organization and students. As a staff and within our teams, we met regularly to identify steps laid out in this process, starting with another round of SWIFT framework fidelity assessment. We reviewed data to ensure our efforts were creating the results we hoped to see. A crucial conversation centered on whether we were making the smallest efforts most likely to make noticeable changes for students and educators. We knew it would be easy for staff to become overwhelmed when our task seemed large and impossible; but by tackling one thing at a time the changes were manageable. For example, we reviewed lessons learned from implementing PBIS strategies just on the playground, and only after that did we move the practices to the other common areas. Likewise, we increased efforts in student recognition by tying them to the vision statement. To support teachers, we incorporated professional development through our equity team, professional learning communities, and staff meetings. Moreover, we created problem-solving sheets to minimize problem behaviors, support regulation, and teach valuable conflict and problem-solving communication skills. The

data always showed our team where to put our focus and, as a team, we made decisions that included the well-being of each student.

The Student Impact

In my last year as this school's principal, we saw significant markers of equitable and inclusive culture and practices. The student intervention team mainly focused on instructional support because the behavioral issues were minimal. Students' overall math and writing scores increased, and groups who represent historically marginalized populations increased state assessment performance from level 1 to level 3. The percentage of students receiving special education services approached 20%, not because we over-identified students, but because parents wanted their children to be in our school community.

Endearing evidence of true belonging emerged near year end. One student (call him A) served in the specialized intensive skills program would soon be leaving the state. By now A, who was nonverbal, identified as Black and an English Learner, spent much of his day in the general education classroom. The teachers created a

schedule that managed seamless transitions between the general and specialized classrooms. When I walked into the general education classroom, I could not tell that this student only shared part of the day with his grade-level peers; he truly belonged. His classmates and teacher planned to do something special for A before he left the school. The idea surfaced that other schools did not do what we did as a school; these fourth and fifth graders could not understand what this meant. Their teacher explained that, because A had special needs, most likely his new school would teach him in a specialized classroom for the entire day with students who had needs similar to his; and he would have limited access to learning with other students. The students were deeply upset and decided to each write a letter to the principal and teacher at their friend's new school. The letters included stories of A doing a report on the planet Pluto, working on his computer to identify root words, using his iPad to communicate with friends and adults, and so much more. These students advocated for him to remain in a general education setting as much as possible so that he could continue to thrive. They were the voice he needed. This was more than an initiative, we were changing the world.

Whole System Engagement

Inclusive schooling is about more than what happens within a classroom or building. Implementation science and SWIFT Center data confirm that for schools to make transformational shifts, they need support from their district (Sailor et al., 2018; Ward et al., 2021). After three years at the dual language immersion school, Dibblee moved to a district leadership role. She carried with her a justice disposition, values, and successful experiences shifting culture and practices toward rightful presence and true belonging for previously marginalized student groups, to the benefit of all students. Next, we share a little about how a justice-oriented leadership role can look at that level of the system.

> Equity still drives my work as a district leader, now focused on inclusive academic instruction. Our current district team priority is establishing strong universal (core) instruction. We are shoring up what we expect our students to receive through teams of teachers, coordinators, and leaders across several departments. Instructionally, we focus on five high-leverage practices identified by meta-analyses (Hattie et al., 2020). We created instructional guidelines for literacy for K-8th grade to minimize the variability of student experiences across the district. Our

goal is to reduce the number of students who need additional and intensified (Tier II and III) instruction, and instead enhance the experience that all students receive in the core curriculum. We already see growth among our early learners, and cut by half the number of students who need intensive instruction and support in each grade level K-8. We are also finding ways to implement this system at the high school level, where we are studying data collected for on-track to graduation as an important measure to guide our decision making.

Conclusion

Justice-oriented leadership is not a solitary endeavor. When at the crossroads of decision making for leaders, building equity educators is a high yield investment. When making changings of this nature, having the support of teams deeply rooted in this work is critical. As equity-focused educators, we uncover our own biases, foster equitable beliefs, redesign systems, implement new practices—all while interrogating data and asking ourselves and others at every level of the educational system questions about equity. Dr. Diblee's team and students felt as if they were changing the world. The transformative power of equity work is life altering for students, their families, and educators.

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