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EDUCATIONAL EQUITY IN THE K-12 CLASSROOM

The Simple Definition of Equity

Have you ever wondered, when you sit in the quiet of your own thinking and reflecting space, "Am I really doing what is equitable? Am I providing instruction or leading or speaking with an equity mindset? Am I looking through the lens of equity? And how do I know?"

If you've ever had that thought, you're not alone! I've had it. So, what is **equity**? Many of us struggle to define it. We think we know it when we see it, but cannot explain it succinctly to those outside of our world of education. It is a term that is used daily. We say that we want equitable education, but for whom? How do we get it? What needs to change? How do we know when we've achieved it?

To truly get at equity, we must first agree that each child is an individual.

I am a Black American. My parents escaped the Jim Crow South in the 1950s, settling in California. Education was important to them, as was making sure our speech had no vestiges of Black Vernacular or a Southern accent. My English was flawless. My grammar impeccable. But I was a child steeply rooted in the culture of Black America. My father was a Black Panther and practicing Muslim. My home culture did not reflect the White European-American middle class "norm" upon which U.S. schools and curriculum were built. My parents were emigrants, yet multi-generational racialized Americans. The disconnect between my own lived experience and the instructional materials—remember

Dick and Jane?—was more a chasm than a gap. Were it not for an amazing third-grade teacher, Mrs. Gowdy, I'm not sure where I would have landed. I know I was not alone.

The diversity of lived experiences of our learners is vast. I cannot list them all, nor can we imagine that we know or understand them all. When the culture of home is distinctly different from that of school, the learner is culturally diverse—whether you can *see* their culture or not.

We have identified and unidentified exceptional learners such as hearing, visually, verbally, or physically impaired, and neurodivergent.

And we have learners who are multiply diverse. Perhaps both culturally and linguistically or linguistically and neurologically, or some other combination.

There are no cookie-cutter kids, so there can be no simple cookie-cutter solutions to equitable access. What's an educator to do?

Well, let's start with a simple definition of equity. The National Equity Project (n.d., para. 1) defines it as "each child receives what they need to develop to their full academic and social potential." I define equity simply and broadly as *without bias against or favoritism for.* When talking about our thoughts, mindsets, and actions as educators being rooted in equity, we must provide an educational experience for each child without bias against any child based on their language or culture or ability or neurodivergence . . . or gender or race.

How do you define equity? Take a minute to reflect and write your own definition in your journal.

> **equity**—without bias against or favoritism for

The Four Equity Indicators

To grade ourselves on educating through a lens of equity, we must have a consistent form of measurement—a metric. How can we quantify, or count, or measure equity? How can we measure bias or favoritism through a scientific, **quantifiable** lens?

> **quantifiable**—anything that can be measured or counted using numbers, e.g., Lexile levels, test scores, number of books read.

Let's look at four indicators of equity (Figure 1.1) and how we can use those to measure whether our curriculum materials, instructional practices, disciplinary actions, policies, procedures, and pretty much everything else in our educational systems are truly equitable—showing no bias against or favoritism for any learner or their lived experience.

We'll rely on these four indicators of equity:

1. Meritocracy

2. Standards

3. Impartiality

4. Asset allocation

Figure 1.1

The Four Equity Indicators
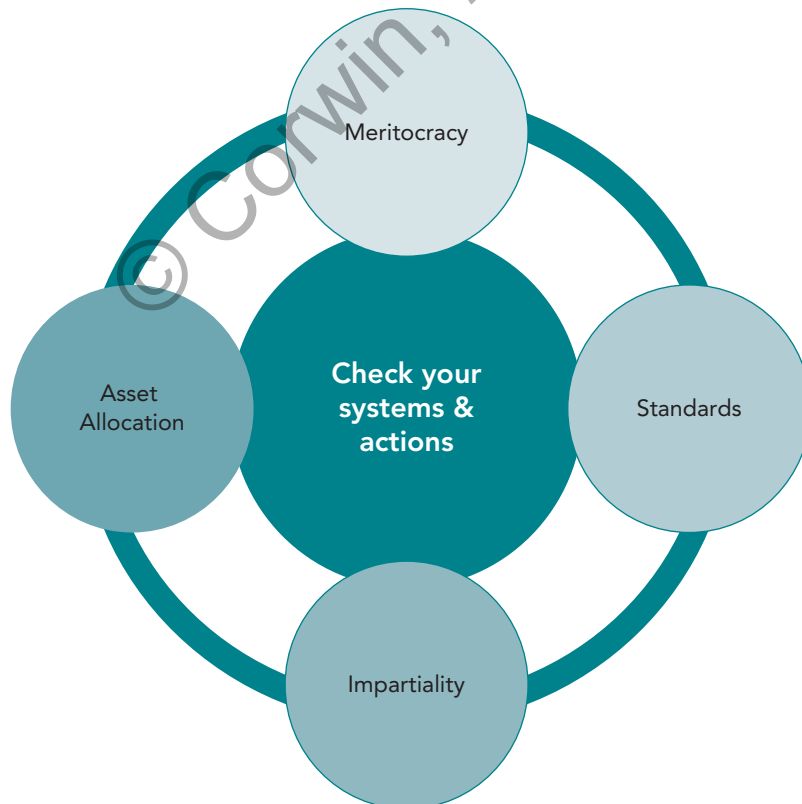
I chose these four indicators after conducting research on achievement indicators and educational equality in other developed and developing nations. UNESCO examined the condition of education through a global lens, viewing quality education as a "fundamental human right." For each of these indicators, an essential question will guide your examination as we check our classroom culture and instructional materials and practices. Each indicator is a source of data, an opportunity to check your outcomes against an ideal. The data informs us of how we are doing: we as educators and our students as learners and future global citizens.

MERITOCRACY

Meritocracy is the idea that power is held by people based on their ability. There are two essential questions to ask here:

- *Who has the power in your classroom?*
- *Are we using that power for the good of the marginalized in our school community?*

In a truly equitable system, those holding the power should be those who have the ability, the desire, and the commitment to use that power for good; for the good of the marginalized, without bias against those who may not be marginalized. We'll get more into this concept in Chapter 4 so don't worry if it feels hazy.

STANDARDS

We typically think of standards as "the knowledge or skills that every student should learn and be able to do at each grade level" (Institute for Educational Sciences, n.d., p. 1). Consider that and think more broadly: who enrolls, who attends, who achieves literacy and numeracy on time?

Think also about the standards of educators—our professional standards and the Educators' Oath in the Practitioner's Perspective box on page 13. We must consider not only the academic targets of the learners, but our adherence to standards that target our skills in crafting and delivering instruction so that every learner can demonstrate mastery. There are two essential questions to ask here:

- *Who is demonstrating mastery?*
- *Are we taking action that results in demonstrating ongoing mastery year over year?*

In a truly equitable system, the standards are not the high bar that only some (children and educators) will reach, but the minimum

proficiency for each person. That means that the instruction we provide and how we provide it is determined by what is required for each child to meet that minimum level of proficiency. When we reflect upon our daily work, we ask the two questions above to shape the next day's work serving our learners.

Examine your own state's professional standards for teaching. In which standards are you demonstrating mastery? In which are you not? What actions could you take to demonstrate mastery year over year?

Practitioner's Perspective

Doctors take the Hippocratic Oath. What if educators also had to take an oath to teach? What would that oath look like? Perhaps something like this:

"I will apply pedagogic measures for the benefit of all children according to my ability and judgment; I will keep them from illiteracy and innumeracy. I will neither use an inappropriate method, nor will I make a suggestion to this effect. I will not teach to a test. I will teach for the benefit of children, remaining free of all intentional injustice, of all mischief, and in particular, of low expectations for children who come to learn" (Berry, 2023, p. 40).

IMPARTIALITY

Impartiality is another way of saying "fairness," or "without bias," but in this instance, it is more specific. The two essential questions we ask here are:

- *Who has representation?*
- *Am I accurately and appropriately considering the cultures of all those affected, or am I acting from a middle-class, White European, Western cultural bias?*

In a truly equitable classroom, every policy, practice, and curriculum instrument must be examined to ensure that you are not harming children by subliminally providing instruction that the children, their lived experiences, their races, their cultures, their people, and their languages are not the norm. For example, minor microaggressive statements such as, "Huh, that's different" in response to a learner's expressed thought or dress, or banning peer support or collaboration because it's viewed as cheating, puts the learners' cultures at odds with yours. Not recognizing all cultural holidays on the class calendar, or questioning why certain learners do not want to dress up for Halloween is partial. Oppression

occurs in many forms, and omission is one of them. We often use the metaphor of "mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors" when discussing the importance of representation and diversity in literature. We'll go deeper into that in Chapter 3.

Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors

Using the metaphors of *mirrors, windows,* and *sliding glass doors* to describe literature is rooted in the work of children's literature scholar Rudine Sims Bishop (2012). When examining literature for diversity of representation, it's about how learners see not only themselves, but others in books.

Mirrors are books where learners see themselves, their cultures, their languages, their lived experiences. Sometimes the characters physically look like them or members of their families. Sometimes the characters come from similar cultural or linguistic backgrounds. Or it could be that they share common lived experiences, even common traumas. The big idea is that learners see themselves reflected in the literature.

Windows are books that provide learners views into the cultures and lived experiences of people who are different from them. Windows give learners diverse perspectives. Here they learn to empathize with people who may not look like them or share common culture but may share lived experiences or thinking. The big idea here is that learners see other cultures and develop multicultural awareness.

Sliding glass doors extends the window metaphor. Learners not only "see" other cultures but are provided an opportunity to "step into" the lived experiences of diverse peoples, even if only for a moment. Learners enjoy an immersion into the lives and worlds of people and cultures they may never otherwise experience. The big idea here is that learners deeply experience other cultures, further developing empathy and multicultural awareness.

ASSET ALLOCATION

Asset allocation is about creating constructive inequality to remedy the historical oppression of marginalized learners. The essential questions here are:

- *Is there positive structural inequality?*
- *Am I choosing and allocating resources to create opportunity and excellence for all involved?*

In a truly equitable classroom, you work to remedy or eliminate gaps and disproportionality. This means that assets or resources (like time and small group instruction) are committed in a targeted way to provide what is needed for those who need more, all the

while ensuring that you do no harm to any other learners. When you allocate classroom assets equitably, you do your part to eliminate disproportionalities in areas such as referrals to special education or suspensions and expulsions from your classroom.

The Four Equity Indicators at Work

To see how we can examine our schools and classrooms through the lenses of the four equity indicators, we'll use two areas common to every K–12 system: foundational skills and discipline. Why these two? Simple. Everyone involved in the day-to-day operations of school has some connection to both. You either provide or are impacted by them. And every learner encounters and is impacted by both at some point in their educational journey.

FOUNDATIONAL SKILLS

Meritocracy

I've yet to meet an educator that doesn't state they want all their learners to read, write, think, and calculate with mastery at grade level. After all, it becomes more difficult to provide content instruction to older learners who lack basic skills. They tend to have more disciplinary issues. Their futures as productive citizens are not nearly as promising as those of learners who are higher achievers.

But do we always do what is in the best interest of our learners? Are children who are racially, culturally, or linguistically diverse equally successful in foundational skills in reading and mathematics when it comes time for state testing? Are there achievement gaps fueled by a **provision gap**?

> **provision gap**—the difference between demonstrated academic ability as measured by high-stakes assessments, often annual state testing, and the required benchmarks of a grade level; the gap that is created by the use of ineffective instructional methods and culturally inappropriate curriculum

When we look at test score data, which groups tend to have the largest gaps? These are the learners we are marginalizing when we do not use our power for good.

Standards

Mastery of foundational literacy skills means the learner can read grade level material with **automaticity**, **prosody**, and high-level

comprehension without scaffolds or supports. We serve learners best when those responsible for determining the instructional methods and materials for each child, especially at kindergarten and Grade 1, ask the two essential questions over and over: *Who is demonstrating mastery? Are we taking action that results in demonstrating ongoing mastery year over year?* When we take it down to the level of *each* child, we move away from decision-making based on price or preference and toward data-based decision-making rooted in equity.

At the higher grade levels and across content areas, our learners rely on those foundational skills. And you rely on your learners having mastered those skills so that they can master the standards for your content area and grade level. As a community of educators in a system rooted in equity, we must hold one another accountable for making choices that result in equal outcomes. We must work with one another not only in our siloed departments and grade levels, but across them.

We make certain our choices, including providing professional learning for those who deliver instruction, are in the best interest of our learners. We make certain that our choices for children who are racially, culturally, or linguistically diverse result in their mastery of foundational skills. We make certain to not create achievement gaps fueled by provision gaps.

> **automaticity**—the ability to read connected text without spending cognitive energy processing low-level details
>
> **prosody**—the ability to read connected text orally with intonation and appropriate emotion in various contexts

Through the frame of standards, when we look at outcomes across the grades, we look again to see which groups tend to have not only large, but also enduring gaps. We identify the subject areas where these gaps present themselves. We analyze when these gaps appear. Which learners are we marginalizing by our inaction or refusal to respond to the needs of each child? What materials selection or methodological approaches need to be modified, strengthened, or abandoned?

Impartiality

An important indicator of impartiality is representation. You might be thinking it's easy to have representation when providing reading instruction. After all, it's all about literature, right? And you're right. Representation in literature is fairly easy, so let's focus on

mathematics. What does impartiality look like when providing foundational math instruction?

Keep in mind, it's more than just who learners see, it's also about the ways we teach. How do you engage your learners? Do you use tools that will spark curiosity and engagement from learners who are historically marginalized through teaching from a White, Western perspective? Is content presented in ways that *accurately and appropriately consider the cultures of all* the learners in your classroom?

The genetic roots of many Black learners in North and South America reach back to the Yoruba people of West Africa, generally from areas that are now Nigeria, Benin, and Togo. Their traditional divination practices, the Ifá divination system, uses a binary system based on a binary principle of 0s and 1s. If this sounds familiar, it is because it is quite similar to the one found in modern computer science.

Babalawos, Ifá diviners or priests, use either an instrument known as an Opele or palm nuts thrown on a tray to create binary patterns. Each pattern corresponds to an Odu, which is a combination of specific symbols. Each of the 16 basic Odus and 240 permutations is associated with a significant body of verses full of wisdom, advice, and references to historical and mythological events.

What may interest and engage Black learners in your classroom, and others as well, is that while the modern binary system is generally attributed to seventeenth-century German mathematician Gottfried Leibenz, the Ifá system has existed since the tenth century, and possibly even earlier.

In addition, the Ifá system is still practiced today, not only in Africa, but among the Yoruba diaspora communities around the world. And that diaspora is likely represented in your school or classroom, but the learners themselves may not even know they are a part of it.

Asset Allocation

If our goal is to have all learners read, write, think, and calculate with mastery at grade level, then we must allocate the necessary resources in a manner that ensures just that. This may mean using a different, more explicit and systematic curriculum. It may mean smaller class sizes. Perhaps it means more time in instruction. And in an equitable system we may need to create this structure of "positive inequality" while maintaining or improving the achievement of learners who are already at grade level.

Foundational skills are just that: the foundation. Without equity in foundational skills, we cannot achieve equality in other areas such as advanced placement coursework.

DISCIPLINE

Meritocracy

Every classroom has issues that arise out of disciplinary challenges. Research tends to support that learners who lack academic skills typically have more disciplinary actions taken against them. Unlike foundational skills that can be remediated so learners catch up, the actions taken against learners for disciplinary infractions often have life and death consequences in the near term.

For children of color and children with special needs, particularly behavior disorders, encounters with the justice system occur far too frequently. To alleviate this, school systems are turning to alternative policies, such as eliminating the use of force by school resource officers and instituting restorative practices to replace punitive actions.

Here we must ask if children who are racially or culturally diverse are disproportionately represented in punitive disciplinary actions in our schools. When we look at suspension, expulsion, and arrest data, which groups tend to be overrepresented in comparison to their percentage of the overall population? These are your disenfranchised learners. They are likely victims of bias and it may not be the children, but the adults who require intervention. Perhaps the classroom instruction that is being provided is not meeting the needs of the learners. Perhaps as educators we lack the cultural competence to connect with racially or culturally diverse learners. Perhaps we even fear some learners because of our lack of cultural connectedness.

Standards

You might wonder what standards have to do with discipline. Recall the definition of standards: "the knowledge or skills that every student should learn and be able to do at each grade level" (Institute for Educational Sciences, n.d., p. 1). We do not have state or national standards for behavior, however we do have expectations. We expect children to *know how* to behave. Those expectations are generally prescribed by community and cultural norms. But whose culture?

And in the absence of written behavior standards and high-stakes assessment of their mastery, we don't teach behavioral norms. We tend to simply expect adherence to norms that inevitably vary from classroom to classroom, year to year.

This has lifelong academic and social implications for our learners. Consider that the United States has the world's highest rate of incarceration (Prison Policy Initiative, 2021). Though it accounts for only 4.23% of the world's population overall, 25%

of the world's prison population is in the United States (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2022; United States Census Bureau, 2024). Mass incarceration is not simply a symptom of our learners' behaviors after leaving school. It is a systemic issue with its roots in how we teach or fail to teach behavior and how we discipline learners while they are in our classrooms.

In an equitable system, standards of behavior are taught. You can teach standards of behavior for your classroom. If the standard isn't met, you should strive to find ways to teach them without further harming any individual.

One of my behavioral pet peeves was the language learners used to address adults. Call me "old school" or a bit of a "Southern traditionalist," but where I come from, adults are addressed as "ma'am" or "sir." In my California classrooms, I made that expectation clear. It was an expectation for not only when they were in my classroom, but at any time on campus. And while some may find that a bit unrealistic, not only did my learners adhere to it, I received accolades for their exemplary behavior outside of my classroom. Other educators appreciated the carryover effect. After a while, my learners taught their peers and siblings to address adults in the same manner. And my learners were all Title I, all learners of color, attending school in what most would describe as "the worst neighborhood in town."

Impartiality

If comprehensive data was collected about who is disciplined in your classroom, what would it show? Think about who you discipline and what you discipline them for. Who is represented? Are **culturally and linguistically diverse learners (CLDLs)** more often disciplined? Is there even greater disproportionality for those learners who are Black, Latine, or Indigenous? Do your Black and Latine learners see themselves as discipline problems? More importantly, are your classroom disciplinary practices a mirror teaching them this?

> **culturally and linguistically diverse learner (CLDL)**—learners whose home culture is not mainstream, middle class, and White and/or whose language background reflects anything other than School English

Here, we adults need the sliding glass doors. We need to walk through them to experience the lives of our learners and develop greater empathy for their lived experiences. Then, we must examine our disciplinary practices to develop an equitable system.

In an equitable system, impartiality of discipline comes from working to develop cultural competence and becoming an antiracist educator. It comes as you work to establish restorative practices and eliminate encounters with the school- or community-based justice systems. We cannot change overrepresentation unless and until we change our systems and our mindsets. That change begins in your classroom and in your mind.

Asset Allocation

Think about your classroom discipline and any disproportionality there. If our goal is to reduce overall punitive disciplinary actions while at the same time eliminating disproportionality and encounters with the juvenile justice system, then we must allocate the necessary resources in a manner that does just that. Examine your curriculum and instruction for representation. Develop cultural competence and an antiracism mindset. Create a system of restorative practices in your classroom and eliminate retributive practices. (For more information on **restorative and retributive disciplinary practices**, see Appendix A.) In an equitable classroom we do these things by allocating resources where needed while maintaining the safety and security of your entire classroom community.

> **restorative practice**—a conflict resolution approach focusing on repairing harm and rebuilding relationships emphasizing dialogue, accountability, and understanding the impact of one's actions, fostering community and trust among participants
>
> **retributive practice**—an approach to discipline centered on punishment for wrongdoers, emphasizing the infliction of penalties proportionate to the offense; prioritizes deterrence and retribution

The good news is, by doing the work in this book, by studying and engaging in thoughtful reflection at each prompt, you will be well on your way!

Creating disciplinary equity is more about our behavior and actions as adults, rather than simply those of the learners. We must shift our mindsets, our behaviors, our beliefs (see Tables 1.1–1.4). Some of that shifting comes in the form of developing cultural competency. Some comes from professional learning and growth. Some from redesigning our systems. And while you may

not be able to change the system, what you model in your classroom just might be the shining exemplar that becomes a catalyst for systemic change.

Table 1.1

What Meritocracy Looks Like in Schools and Classrooms

EXEMPLARY CLASSROOMS LOOK LIKE THIS . . .	. . . NOT THIS
Foundational Skills	
At grades K–3, classroom instruction is clearly differentiated in ELA and math with learners who are below grade level receiving explicit, systematic instruction that meets their needs.	At grades K–3, classroom instruction in ELA and math is the same for all learners regardless of their current performance level.
Struggling learners receive instruction that accelerates their learning so they may close any gap within two years.	Struggling learners may not be identified, do not receive differentiated instruction, or the "differentiation" is remediation rather than acceleration. Instruction does not support closing gaps.
Achievement gaps either (a) do not exist between subgroups, or (b) are on a trajectory of closure within two years.	Achievement gaps exist between subgroups and are not on a trajectory of closure within two years.
Discipline	
Learners removed from class for behavior are not disproportionately of any one race, ethnicity, gender, or other identity group. Any behavior that receives punitive treatment is addressed equally and at all times, regardless of who commits the infraction.	Learners removed from class for behavior may disproportionately be of a particular race, ethnicity, gender, or other identity group. Behaviors that receive punitive treatment are not addressed equally. Favoritism is shown to particular racial, ethnic, gender, or other identified groups.

Table 1.2

What Standards Look Like in Schools and Classrooms

EXEMPLARY CLASSROOMS LOOK LIKE THIS . . .	. . . NOT THIS
Foundational Skills	
Elementary core curriculum is chosen based on a demonstrated scientific instructional methodology and implemented with a level of fidelity that ensures all learners demonstrate grade-level proficiency in literacy and numeracy skills at each grade level.	Core curriculum is chosen based on something other than science that backs the efficacy of the instructional methodology; and/or implementation lacks fidelity; and/or more than 5% of learners lack grade-level proficiency in literacy and numeracy skills at each grade level.
Discipline	
Standards of discipline are written.	No consistent standards exist for behavioral expectations in each grade level.
Behavioral norms are consistent from classroom to classroom and matriculate from grade to grade.	Each instructor uses their own norms and judgment to determine what is appropriate behavior.
Instruction in behavioral norms and social-emotional skills is provided as part of the regular course of instruction.	No instruction in social-emotional skills is provided.

Table 1.3

What Impartiality Looks Like in Schools and Classrooms

EXEMPLARY CLASSROOMS LOOK LIKE THIS . . .	. . . NOT THIS
Foundational Skills	
Curriculum provides mirrors, windows, and doors in both ELA and math, so that learners can connect to the content through a variety of perspectives representative of themselves and other culturally and linguistically diverse peoples.	Curriculum tends to be White Eurocentric in perspective. Little or no representation of culturally and linguistically diverse peoples, or their contributions to the content area are found.

EXEMPLARY CLASSROOMS LOOK LIKE THIS . . .	. . . NOT THIS
Discipline	
Racial, ethnic, gender, learning ability, or socioeconomic-status subgroup disproportionality does not exist in disciplinary data.	Racial, ethnic, gender, learning ability, or socioeconomic-status subgroup disproportionality exists in disciplinary data.
Classroom management supports a culture where all learners can see themselves as positive behavior models.	Poor classroom management results in a culture where CLDLs are more often seen as disciplinary problems.

Table 1.4

What Asset Allocation Looks Like in Schools and Classrooms

EXEMPLARY CLASSROOMS LOOK LIKE THIS . . .	. . . NOT THIS
Foundational Skills	
CLDLs and learners-of-promise receive explicit, systematic curriculum and targeted instruction that meets their needs, resulting in at- or above-grade level outcomes in all subjects.	Resources are not allocated in a manner that will effectively support the academic achievement of CLDLs and learners-of-promise.
Learners at- and above-grade level receive curriculum and instruction that meets their needs so that they continue acceleration at a pace commensurate with their abilities and enrichment in line with their interests.	Learners at- and above-grade level receive curriculum and instruction that results in disengagement due to slow pace or low-interest and that may result in under-performance.
Discipline	
Sincere and consistent efforts are made to intervene early using restorative practices in the classroom, particularly for learners who appear to struggle with compliance or exhibit behaviors which may be deemed disruptive or destructive.	No early intervention exists. Early warning signs are ignored or dismissed.
Teachers seek out mental health resources for all learners, particularly for learners who appear to struggle with compliance or exhibit behaviors which may be deemed disruptive or destructive.	No resources are available or sought out.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we've covered a simple definition of equity and the Four Equity Indicators of meritocracy, standards, impartiality, and asset allocation. We considered how those indicators present themselves in foundational skills and disciplinary actions. You'll revisit these indicators many times in this text. So, if it feels a bit murky still, not to worry. The content will spiral and scaffold. Spaced repetition is a proven strategy for reaching mastery.

In Chapter 2, you'll develop an understanding of implicit and explicit bias. We'll examine racism's four tiers, bias, and their roles in equitable instruction.

Reflect and Act

Reflect on any questions and notes you wrote while reading about the four equity indicators. Now examine your own classroom, school, or district—depending on the capacity in which you serve. In your journal, respond to these questions: Where do you see inequity? What do you think is the most egregious of those? Which do you think should be addressed first? Can you use the four equity indicators to begin the work? What additional learning or supports might you need?

Use the following mindset meter as a self-assessment. The mindset meter probes different levels of understanding. Use it to make connections between the chapter content and your beliefs and behaviors. Reflect. Think. Plan. Record your responses in your journal.

●●● MY MINDSET METER

Complete the mindset meter as a self-assessment of this chapter's content.

Knowledge: The purpose of equity in the classroom as I understand it from this chapter:

_____

_____

_____

_____

Comprehension: The four equity indicators as I understand them from this chapter:

_____

_____

_____

_____

Application: How I can use each of the equity indicators in my daily work:

_____

_____

_____

_____

Analysis: I can draw these conclusions about (in)equity based on what I learned in this chapter:

_____

_____

_____

_____

Synthesis: This is how I will begin or continue to work through the lens of equity:

_____

_____

_____

_____

Evaluation: I used to think . . . but now I think . . .

_____

_____

_____

_____

If you are completing this work as part of a book study or professional learning, you may find there are great variances in the way you and your peers respond. This is because your lived experiences and your cultures may be more diverse than you think.