The *Lens* of Systemic Oppression

Applying a Racial Equity Frame

"I've wanted to see beyond the Western, mechanical view of the world and see what else might appear when the lens was changed." – Margaret J. Wheatley

Whenever I arrive on a real location, I have to move around and work out what the best angles are going to be. When I was moving around with the lens, I discovered things that the naked eye would not have." – filmmaker Pedro Almodovar

The Metaphor of A Lens

We make dozens of decisions each day that impact those we serve. We grapple with how to respectfully reach out to new communities and serve them in culturally responsive ways that don't perpetuate inequities they face. At a foundational level, we must analyze the culture and conditions that impact the people and places we interact with in order to aid our decision-making.

Even as an organization operating in multiple settings that manifest a wide range of organizational patterns, policies, and practices, we know that each site requires learning and unpacking a new set of "rules" of operation.

As leaders for equity, our primary concern is to interrupt those rules that serve, either implicitly or explicitly, to perpetuate opportunity gaps for vulnerable students. To become agents of change who make strategic and courageous decisions, we must learn to run a set of filters, or lenses, that shift our vantage point and uncover what the "naked eye" cannot see.

Seeing is Believing

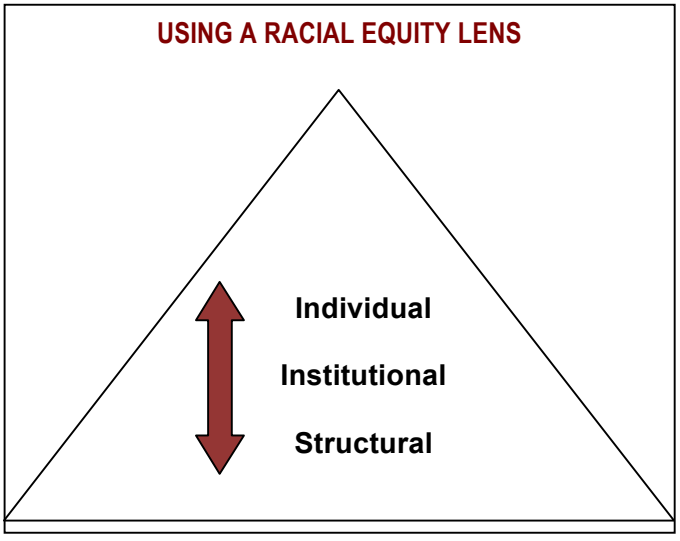
Beliefs influence perceptions…
Perception structures reality
Reality suggest possibilities…
Choices stimulate actions
Actions affect outcomes…
Outcomes impact beliefs

Source: Steve Zuieback

The metaphor of a lens describes the possibility of seeing our contexts in new and revealing ways. If *seeing* leads to believing, and *believing* ultimately shapes our actions, then we must expand our ways of seeing to transform troubling outcomes for young people.

Three levels of analysis inform each lens: the **individual**, the **institutional**, and the **structural**. By applying our lens at each level, we can begin to identify opportunities for equitable change.

No single lens can tell the whole story, but using a strong filter allows us to stand "on the balcony" and observe the "dance floor" below (in this case the school or organization) with its complex set of relationships, rules, and moves. From this aerial viewpoint, we can think critically about our decisions and increase the predictability that our actions will lead to more equitable outcomes.



The Importance of Critical Judgment

When using a racial equity lens, we must exercise **critical judgment** before taking action. Critical judgment is the process of separating the essential from the non-essential, distilling any number of decisions into those best matched to our desired outcome or vision. Critical judgment implies a cycle of questioning, action and reflection premised on the belief that there is no "right answer" lying in wait. Finally, critical judgment implies a *leap of faith* – faith that if we take a calculated risk to disrupt the status quo, we do indeed possess the will, skill, knowledge, capacity and emotional intelligence to adjust our actions as necessary.

Here are some key principles of critical judgment that we seek to embody:

- I will take responsibility for what I don't directly control -- structural racism, systemic oppression, and all forms of bias -- and attempt to influence transformative change within seemingly entrenched systems.

- I will act within my "zone of proximal development" (Vygotsky, 1978), or stretch zone, to model the types of discourse and decisions that I want adults to enact with young people. I understand that positive behavior and modeling have a reproductive effect and thus hold every moment with a client as sacred and teachable.

- I will rigorously and flexibly apply my racial equity lens to assess the current culture, conditions, and competencies needed to best serve our clients.

- I will engage in a cycle of action and reflection, what Paolo Freire called *praxis*, that allows me to learn from both successes and failures.

- I will set personal learning goals that bring into high relief my growth areas while committing to continuous professional development that cultivates my will, skill, knowledge, capacity, and emotional intelligence.

The Frame of a Racial Equity Lens

The **racial equity lens** allows us to uncover the structures, policies, and behaviors that sustain unequal outcomes for children. The "Western, mechanical" worldview cited by organizational consultant and community activist Margaret Wheatley elevates the *individual* over the system, which can lead to distorted perspectives on inequity. We hear frequent refrains premised on this notion of individualism: *If only that student would work harder; she just doesn't care! Why don't those families invest enough in their children's education to come to Back-to-School Night?* Such comments decontextualize the behavior of individuals from the larger system of oppression and feed a "blame-the-victim" mentality.

In naming systemic oppression, we seek to challenge individualistic thinking and interrogate the complex interaction of people, practices, institutions, and ideology that perpetuate inequity. Oppression in the United States maps all too predictably to socio-economic, cultural, and racial factors. The U.S. Census Bureau recently reported that the income gap between rich and poor Americans grew last year to its largest margin ever. The top-earning 20% of the country garnered nearly 50% of the income while the bottom 20%, those below the poverty line, went home with 3.4 %. (www.census.gov)

At the same time, the United States is home to 5% of the world's population but 25% of its prisoners, and those incarcerated are disproportionately African American and Latino. These

statistics reveal historical patterns of inequality that, despite the gains of the civil rights era, have persisted and even deepened over the last three decades.

As leaders for equity, we must understand our schools and organizations as part of the systemic fabric of inequality. Failing to acknowledge this reality, we will unwittingly reproduce oppressive dynamics that blame children for the deep-rooted opportunity gaps that hinder their growth.

Three Levels of Oppression

Systemic oppression manifests on the **individual**, the **institutional**, and the **structural** level, and we offer an example of each.

Individual

A teacher holds an unconscious mental model that her students of color are not "college material." This belief, left unchecked, leads to lower expectations of work quality, which allows for less rigorous teaching methods, and finally produces a gap in the actual skills and preparation of these very students. Similarly, a college counselor might push lower-income students toward community colleges or job training programs while counseling more privileged students to apply to four-year universities. These scenarios are all too real and, we would argue, a result of unexamined belief systems nurtured by an oppressive system.

Institutional

By institution, we mean a single school or organization with its own internal set of norms, policies, and practices. On this level, we might witness a discipline policy that correlates to a disproportionate number of African American boys being sent out of class or a master schedule that *de facto* tracks English Language Learners into lower-level coursework. It may be that an organization creates a culture centered on dominant culture that makes it inhospitable to people of color. Though one might argue that these policies stem from individual belief systems, the institutional lens reveals how an organization's patterns are self-sustaining and thus more than the sum of its individual actors.

Structural

Structural oppression involves the macro-relationship between institutions that perpetuates or even exacerbates unequal outcomes for children. Despite its title, we would posit the "No Child Left Behind" Act as a prime example of structural oppression. In her recent piece "A Nation's Education Left Behind"[1], former Assistant Secretary of Education Diane Ravitch writes

> *"We have now had ten years of No Child Left Behind, and we now know that there has been very little change in the gaps between the children of the rich and the children of the poor, between black children and white children… Just this week, the federal government released the urban district test results and we could see that the gap remained as large as ever. After ten years of NCLB, the children at the bottom were still at the bottom."*

By critically analyzing this policy, we can see how politicians colluded with financial interests to create a hollow discourse of opportunity while in fact sowing the seeds of oppression.

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[1] Diane Ravitch, Schools Matter, December 11, 2011

Assumptions and Questions

A racial equity lens is grounded in several assumptions that cut across the three levels above. These assumptions help us grapple with how and why oppression continues to play out in schools staffed with good, well-intentioned people. What we know is that inequitable racialized outcomes do not require racist actors. A person can be committed to the care, well-being, and educational progress of a child and still, unconsciously, participate in systemic oppression.

> "Inequitable racialized outcomes do not require racist actors."
>
> John Powell

Here are the core **assumptions** we offer for understanding oppression:

- Oppression and injustice are human creations and phenomena, built into our current economic system, and therefore can be undone.
- Oppression (e.g. racism, colonialism, class oppression, patriarchy, and homophobia) is more than just the sum of individual prejudices. Its patterns are systemic and therefore self-sustaining without dramatic interruption.
- Systemic oppression exists at the level of institutions (harmful policies and practices) and across structures (education, health, transportation, economy, etc) that are interconnected and reinforcing over time.
- Systemic oppression has historical antecedents. We must face our national legacy and current manifestations of racism and economic inequality in order to transform them.
- Without rigorous examination, behavior is reproductive. By default, current practices, cultural norms and institutional arrangements foster and maintain inequitable outcomes.
- To undo systemic oppression, we must forge multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, multi-lingual alliances and create democratic processes that give voice to new organizing systems for humanity.
- Addressing oppression and bias (conscious and unconscious) inevitably raises strong emotions in clients, and we must be prepared and trained to address these feelings.

We also offer a set of **analytical questions** to ask while applying this lens:

1. How do we understand the economic and racial forces behind the inequities we see? How might we name the "system" in which we are all sitting?
2. What level of consciousness do colleagues, partners and affiliates possess about the forces underlying inequity?
3. How are we *talking* about the problem we are trying to solve? Is the conversation digging down to root causes in a way that could lead to *productive action*?
4. W*ho* are the people affected by the current structure of oppression? Are they at the table?

5. Who shapes the dominant narrative about those being served at any given moment? How are different constituents described? How would they tell their story? Is there a counter-narrative coming from those being served?

6. What are the specific disparities/inequities we seek to eliminate through this collective focus and action? What barriers stand in the way of achieving more equitable outcomes?

7. What are the population and geographic targets for our effort? Specifically, *for whom* and where are we trying to make a difference?

8. What will an equitable OUTCOME look like? How will we KNOW we have made progress? When do we expect to see results? What is our timeframe?

9. Who does and does not have power in this institution, in the community? What is power based on here?

10. How safe is it here for different people to share their truths here, and how can I foster a culture of safety and relational trust to move forward?

11. How can I build my practice as a leader for equity, starting with who I am and how I understand my own experiences around oppression?

12. How can I build the alliances to move forward in making decisions that interrupt reproductive practices?