

E Q U I T Y 1 0 1

CULTURE

This book is dedicated to my parents, John & Blanch Linton, in recognition of the culture of excellence, opportunity, and fairness with which they raised me. Growing up, I was mostly unaware of race, but when I learned about racial inequity, I knew how to work towards equity because of how I was raised: everyone deserves the god-given right to experience excellence and opportunity, no matter who they are, what they look like, nor where they come from—and it is my personal responsibility to ensure a culture exists that empowers this right.

—Curtis Linton

*To Eva, Dominic, and Maya: You are our present,
the future, and the work*

—Bonnie Davis

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CULTURE

BOOK 2

CURTIS LINTON
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Contents

Acknowledgments	vii
About the Authors	xi
Prologue	xiii
1. A School Culture of Equity	1
Apollo Middle School—Tucson, Arizona	2
2. The Equity Framework	17
Culturally Proficient Teachers	20
Working Definition of Equitable Culture	22
Equity Characteristics Within Culture	26
The Equity Lens	27
3. Equitable Culture: Expectations	33
High Expectations: Belief Systems	36
High Expectations: Culturally Proficient Communication Styles	38
High Expectations: Educator Responsibility	40
The Attitude of High Expectations	42
4. Equitable Culture: Rigor	45
Rigor Within Equity	47
Defining Rigorous Culture	48
Student Potential as Defined by Rigor	50
Creating a Culture of Rigor	52
5. Equitable Culture: Relevancy	57
Relevant School Culture	59
Inclusive Environment	60

Avoiding Disengagement	61
Culture of Relevancy	62
Cultural Competency	64
Respeto	66
Minimizing Whiteness	68
6. Equitable Culture: Relationships	71
Equitable Culture: Developing Relationships	72
Equitable Culture: Student Relationships	73
Equitable Culture: Collaboration	77
Equitable Culture: Parent and Community Relationships	79
Family Centers	80
7. Equitable Culture: Actualization	85
Epilogue	103
References	105
Index	107

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Without the hundreds of educators who have allowed me and my crew into their schools and classrooms, I never would have had the opportunity to learn about equity and effective school culture. The most important person in the work of school improvement is the ground-level practitioner who shows up every day ready to lead students toward their greatest hopes and aspirations—I honor and thank you all for the incredible work you do.

Most of all, I thank my wife, Melody, for keeping me humbled and focused on why this work really matters. Thanks.

—Curtis Linton

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—Bonnie Davis

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About the Authors



Curtis Linton is executive vice president and co-owner of School Improvement Network, where he oversees all content and product development. The resources produced by Curtis and his team support administrators, principals, and teachers in increasing their effectiveness as educators so they can succeed in helping 100%

of students become college and career ready. Throughout his career, Curtis has documented the improvement efforts and best practices of the most successful schools across North America. Annually, Curtis and his team visit over 100 of the very best classrooms and schools where equity is actualized every day.

Curtis has authored several books, including *Equity 101: The Equity Framework*, and co-authored *Courageous Conversations About Race: A Field Guide for Achieving Equity in Schools*, which received the 2006 National Staff Development Council's Book of the Year award. Curtis is also a nationally recognized education consultant specializing in equity, school improvement, leadership, and Common Core. In addition, he is a co-organizer of the national Summit for Courageous Conversations, an educational conference that focuses on building racial equity in schools.

Curtis lives with his wife, Melody, and two children, Dominic and Maya, in Salt Lake City, Utah. With his wife, he runs the Domino Foundation, which supports families that have adopted transracially. For more information, visit www.dominofoundation.org. He received his master's degree from the University of Southern California. Curtis can be reached through the School

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Photo by Kim Anderson.

Bonnie M. Davis, PhD, is a veteran teacher of more than 40 years who is passionate about education. She holds a BS in education, an MA in English, an MAI in communications and film studies, and a PhD in English. For 30 years, she taught English in secondary schools, community colleges, universities, homeless shelters, and a men's prison. Following that, she was the professional development program planner for the International Education Consortium, housed at the University of Missouri-St. Louis.

Dr. Davis is the recipient of many awards, including Teacher of the Year in two districts, the Anti-Defamation League's World of Difference Community Service Award, the Missouri Governor's Award for Teaching Excellence, and the 2012 Educational Innovator Award from the School Improvement Network.

Dr. Davis's Corwin Press books include *How to Teach Students Who Don't Look Like You: Culturally Responsive Teaching Strategies* (2nd ed., 2012), *How to Coach Teachers Who Don't Think Like You: Using Literacy Strategies to Coach Across Content Areas* (2007), *The Biracial and Multiracial Student Experience: A Journey to Racial Literacy* (2009), and *Creating Culturally Considerate Schools: Educating Without Bias* (2012, with co-author Kim L. Anderson). Other publications include numerous articles and book chapters focusing on literacy and equity.

Dr. Davis is the mother of two adult children, Leah and Reeve, and one granddaughter, Eva, and resides in St. Louis, Missouri with Fred Baugh, her partner of 22 years. She provides professional development services to districts, giving keynotes, workshops, and ongoing support through her consulting firm, Educating for Change. She may be reached at www.educatingforchange.com or by e-mail at a4achievement@earthlink.net.

Prologue

My wife and I bought our first house in a beautiful old neighborhood of craftsman bungalows in Salt Lake City, Utah. I love to cook, and I had always dreamed of growing tomatoes in my garden. I had never actually grown tomatoes, though I had pulled up thousands of weeds around my mother's plants when I was young. In all my enthusiasm, I looked at my yard and discovered that it was hard, dry, solid clay. It had been decades since any previous owner had worked and churned the soil. The clay was so hard that not even grass and weeds would grow in it.

My first thought was that I better buy a high-quality tomato plant for it to succeed in this hard, clayey soil—the extra money would be worth it to get the big, red, juicy tomatoes I dreamed of. Luckily, a patient and understanding person at the garden center kindly explained that if I did not rework the soil through tilling, aerating, and adding significant manure and organic material to it, the clay soil would choke my plant's roots and cause the plant to wither and die.

Before I ever planted a single tomato plant, I spent many hours and several weeks churning the soil in my yard and creating a system—a culture—that could not only keep alive what I planted, but also allow them to grow, thrive, and produce the beautiful fruits and vegetables I hoped to harvest. Harvesting this produce could only come after creating the ongoing conditions for effective growth and development.

School culture is like the soil that plants grow in. If, in a garden, we focus all of our efforts on watering, pruning, feeding, and supporting the plants without assuring the soil is ready, we are left with weak plants that wither and die at the slightest challenge. If, in a school, we focus all of our efforts on the strategies, curriculum,

data, assessments, and interventions without first building a culture of acceptance, support, relationships, and excellence for each and every individual student and educator, then we keep the school on the cycle of continuous improvement without ever actually improving.

In visiting, observing, and documenting hundreds of highly successful schools across North America, I have strongly concluded that all of the “best practices” in education cannot overcome a toxic school culture accustomed to mediocre student performance. No matter how wealthy or poor, no matter how White or Brown or Black, no matter whether English is spoken as a first or second language, no matter whatever other characteristic may define a school—the success of the students and educators depends on the effort they put into building the culture of the school.

One year after our tomatoes started growing, we added life and soul to our beautiful little garden: We adopted our son, Dominic, and then four years later, we adopted our daughter, Maya. Both children are Black and were placed with us by their African American birth mothers. Even though Melody and I had worked hard to build a culture within our home that was loving, supportive, and accepting of everyone, we recognized that the “garden” of our own lives—our cultural competency—was insufficiently devoid of racial understanding and awareness. Much like our physical garden, we had to till our internal “soil” and enrich it with knowledge, relationships, and awareness of what it means to be of color in a very White world—we had to build a truly inclusive culture within our home where the inherent differences between us and our own children could be normed and equalized.

About the time Dominic was born, I met Bonnie Davis, one of my key allies and partners in this work of equitizing education for all students. Bonnie likewise is a White parent of a Black son. For me, she was one of the clearest voices I had ever heard as to what it means to acknowledge one’s own Whiteness in an effort to overcome institutionalized inequities and racism—whether in school or in the home. Bonnie laid out the strategies, illustrated the realities, and helped me process the White side of racial equity. Through these conversations, I learned how to look at the privilege of my own White experience, rather than dwelling solely on the inequities of others different from myself.

I invite you to join me and my co-author Bonnie Davis on this journey to build an equitable school culture that works for all students.

Bonnie is one of the foremost educational experts on what it means to work through personal experience, bias, and expectations to succeed with students different from one's self. This is at the heart of creating an equitable school culture: norming difference for students so that each and every one fundamentally knows he or she is loved, accepted, and supported toward excellence, no matter how that student might differ from the educators and other students in the building. An equitable school culture can only exist when the staff as a whole is vested in creating an environment wherein every student succeeds.

Throughout this book, when we use the term *diverse* to describe students, we are referencing directly the racial and other characteristics that set apart a student from the dominant White and middle-class norms that have so defined the practices and culture of our schools. Serving one "norm" rather than the vast diversities now so apparent in today's students only guarantees the continuation of educational inequities. As educators work to directly address their school's racial and other inequities, they will accomplish equity, which is eliminating student achievement disparities and lifting all students to high levels of success.

For schools to achieve this, educators need to address equity at three levels: personal, institutional, and professional. The first book of this series, *Equity 101: The Equity Framework*, addressed these levels as follows:

- Personal equity guides the process of centering one's self in equity and uncovering one's own biases, stereotypes, and privileges.
- Institutional equity explores how a school and school system can overcome institutionalized factors that limit student achievement, especially for students of color and those from diverse backgrounds.
- Professional equity focuses on how efforts to successfully implement equitable practices can assure individualized support for all students.

Real stories of change are critically important in achieving equity. Throughout this book, we share the stories of schools, school systems, and educators who went through a change process personally, institutionally, and professionally to achieve equity for their students. These stories illustrate the process of equitizing education so that it works for all students, no matter their personal diversities.

Whether a teacher, a principal, a coach, or an administrator, these examples of real educators and actual schools serve as a model for you and your colleagues in creating an equitable culture that works for all students.

Throughout this book, we prompt you to use the equity lens as your tool in deciphering the equity efforts of the educators in these stories—and ultimately in understanding your own efforts to equitize your work as an educator. At the end of each chapter, engage in the Equity in Action implementation exercises, which include discussion questions and reflection prompts. Further, you will be guided to take advantage of the School Improvement Network's on-demand professional development resource, PD 360, where you will find interactive forums and videos of the schools in this book, and engage the *Educator Effectiveness System* as an ongoing support in your equity efforts. To access these tools, please visit www.schoolimprovement.com/equity101.

No individual student ever enters school with the hope to fail. The natural inclination for a student is to dream of excellence and acceptance. But when school culture stands between the student and his or her dreams, the school has failed in its fundamental purpose of helping all kids succeed. Equitable school culture is the foundational characteristic of educational institutions that work day in, day out for adults and students alike. Thank you for entering into this journey with us to norm difference in our schools for all kids.

Sincerely,
Curtis Linton