THE COMPLEXITIES OF EQUITY

NAVIGATING SHADES OF GRAY IN SCHOOLS AND ORGANIZATIONS

LATISH C. REED

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Introduction

Do the Right Thing, a classic movie by Spike Lee, burst onto the scene in 1989 to a barrage of controversy. I was a rising high school senior who was raised in a pretty strict home where I could not go to R-rated movies. However, I was curious about the movie because of the controversy surrounding it. Even before its release, the movie's subject matter generated polarizing debate. Some were nervous that the movie would cause riots in urban Black and Brown neighborhoods. Denaby (1989) wrote a review in *New York Magazine* that predicted that the movie would incite Black and Brown people to violence. He said, "If Spike Lee is a commercial opportunist, he is also playing with dynamite in an urban playground. The response to the movie could get away from him."

The movie climax shows a white police officer killing a young Black man in front of neighbors. This happens after the police are called to break up a disturbance between the young man, his friends, and a white business owner. The officers struggle to subdue the large, dark-skinned Black man. Finally, one officer is able to put him in a chokehold with his baton. Despite the crowd's pleas to let him go, the officer keeps his grip tight around the man's neck. Several police officers form a barrier between the majority Black and Brown onlookers as they watch his body go limp. After neighbors watch the murder in real-time, the neighborhood erupts in an uprising.

Following the movie's release, no actual riots or uprisings were reported. In fact, years later, Lee would express his outrage that critics would even suggest that Black and Brown communities would riot because of watching a film (*The Guardian*, n.d.). Even though there was fear and disdain for the film at that time, others praised it for its candid portrayal of racial tensions of the time. Gene Siskel and Roger Ebert (n.d.), among the most famous and respected movie critics of the era, ranked the movie number one for 1989 and one of the top ten movies of the decade.

The following year, I was a college freshman who embraced my newfound freedom. I rented and watched *Do the Right Thing* and several other forbidden movie titles on my VHS player. Few movies would have the lasting impression that this film had on me. The movie provided a needed and textured context for reflecting upon the complex nature of race relations in diverse communities. It showed conflict and compassion while giving me a tangible piece of art to interrogate my own views and experiences with race as a young, Black woman on a predominately white campus.

Fast forward to May 25, 2020, Memorial Day, when the entire world was shut down in some fashion. I was stuck in the house with my eighth grade son whose school had worked hard to provide as much educational coherence as possible to families because we had all been thrust into the COVID-19 pandemic. While I, along with my family and friends, was anxious about the uncertainties of the virus's impact, I was somewhat enjoying the different pace of life. Like almost everyone else, I watched movies, made way too many home-cooked meals and desserts, and increased my social media engagement to two other platforms.

On the evening of May 25th, those new social media pages began to show images of a neighborhood in distress. I saw that another unarmed Black man, George Floyd, had died because of an interaction with the police in Minneapolis, MN. To avoid mental and physical anxiety, I had learned that as police brutality and killings of unarmed Black and Brown people became more publicized, I had to monitor what I took in from both social and network media. However, with the pandemic in full swing, any significant event would attract an extraordinary amount of attention. So, I started to read the early reports. At first, the official news outlets reported that George Floyd was resisting arrest, and that he had a medical crisis and died in police custody. These seemed to be the facts, but according to social media, there was much more to this story.

On social media, I saw reports that an officer had held his knee to Floyd's neck until he died. I was stunned. Within days, the national media outlets also began to report the same thing. Then, videos and pictures of the officer with his knee on Floyd's

neck began surfacing. There also seemed to be an actual cell phone video that had been captured by a high school student who was passing by. She ended up posting it on social media and that is how I was able to see it. I read what had happened, but I could not watch the video in its entirety. However, I did see a few images of the neighborhood residents that had assembled and watched the murder in real time.

The more details became available, the more this tragedy reminded me of the devastating climax scene of *Do the Right Thing*. The pictures released of officers instructing the crowd to stay back as Officer Derek Chauvin had his knee on Floyd's neck mirrored the events in the movie. People were barricaded from where they saw inhumanity take place in real time. Just as in the movie, the people had looks of horror on their faces as George Floyd was murdered in plain sight (Salter, 2021). At the time of Chauvin's trial, those who were there that fateful day described people yelling at officers to stop and becoming agitated when they realized Floyd had become unresponsive. It was the same as in the climactic scene of the movie, where everyone is in a daze after the victim is removed by the police.

The main difference was that in the movie, the neighborhood immediately erupted in a flame of uprisings. People began to destroy and set property on fire. But the people in the real-life Minneapolis neighborhood dispersed. They reemerged in social and national news outlets to tell the world of the unjust murder they witnessed in broad daylight. The power of their cell phone recordings and eye-witness testimony set off a global "awakening" about hard truths that marginalized people had been sharing for centuries.

REFLECTION

How does art reflect and influence real-life events, particularly in terms of social justice and human experiences? Which pieces of art, films, or music have had a significant influence on your understanding of race relations, injustice, or activism?

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Source: Entertainment Pictures / Alamy

Source: Associated Press/Pool Court TV

TOP: In Spike Lee's 1989 film, *Do The Right Thing,* Mookie (Spike Lee), Sal (Danny Aiello), Vito (Richard Edson), and Pino (John Turturro) stand in shock outside of Sal's Famous Pizzeria after witnessing the police killing of Radio Raheem (Bill Nunn).

BOTTOM: On May 25, 2020, bystanders in a Minneapolis neighborhood looked on in shock as they witnessed the police killing of George Floyd.

In that moment, reality mirrored art. But the art was based on a reality that has known slavery and racial injustice for centuries, on a reality that allows some lives to matter less than others, and on a reality that encourages the perpetuation of racism and racial violence in its most important systems and institutions. During this time, my personal and professional experiences as a middle-aged Black woman merged, and I witnessed what I believed would be a real social and cultural shift. In my career as a teacher, scholar, educational leader, and consultant, my goal has always been to advocate and create change for traditionally marginalized

individuals and groups of people. I thought, "Now the whole world understands, and we will get the justice we seek!"

That moment has passed. It has been just a few short years since the tragedy of George Floyd's murder, but many of the challenges that we faced before have resurfaced with even more barriers to overcome. As the landscape changes and Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) efforts come under more criticism, it has become increasingly important for individuals to consider how they will continue to advocate for marginalized individuals and groups in the face of this resistance.

This book aims to build a bridge for people so they can move from ideas to tangible actions. Using the Equity Empowerment Continuum framework, I share lessons learned as a school practitioner, researcher, and the inaugural equity leader in a large organization to help readers ground their decision-making and actions, so they are oriented toward more equitable outcomes.

In 2016, I began as an inaugural equity administrator in a large school district with about seventy thousand students and an estimated eight thousand five hundred employees. I came to this role with a strong education in equity-based school leadership from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. I also spent several years as a professor and researcher teaching how to be an equitable leader. I offer both theoretical and practical insights into addressing equity within the work setting, as well as details from my personal journey.

That journey begins with navigating my ICE-T (identity, context, experiences, and timing) and employing that knowledge to advocate for equitable change in different settings and situations. Next, using personal and professional vignettes and authentic historical and contemporary examples, I put forth the Equity Empowerment Continuum (EEC) using black, white, and shades of gray to discuss and analyze various professional or personal actions or lack thereof that can lead to change on different levels. *The Complexities of Equity* offers a new perspective to navigating current challenges in implementing more equitable opportunities and structures for those who need more to succeed. The last chapter is a call to action for readers to lean into their spheres of influence to lead authentic change in their workplace and personal lives.

The world will continue to grapple with how different people from different walks of life coexist. This is an opportunity for the reader to reflect upon how they will contribute to making that world a better place for all.

DIVERSITY, EQUITY & INCLUSION (DEI) AT WORK

Once a fuller picture of what happened on that fateful day in Minneapolis emerged, global protests erupted. People flooded the streets worldwide to demand justice for George Floyd and the countless other victims of racial brutality and killing. It was almost as if the whole world said in that moment, "We will no longer turn a blind eye." With that came an awareness of the need to examine where people worked. Discussions about and examinations of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) became commonplace in the world of work.

But before discussing how DEI work has trended, I want to define equity, its companion terms (diversity and inclusion), and its ultimate goal to address life's "isms." CEO and author Catherine Mattice offered a basic equity definition in an article written for LinkedIn. According to Mattice (2023), "Equity refers to the fair and just treatment of all individuals, regardless of their diverse characteristics. It means ensuring that everyone has equal access to opportunities and resources and an equal chance to succeed. That means barriers preventing some individuals from succeeding must also be removed."

My definition is even simpler: *Instead of making sure everyone has the same or equal resources, opportunities, and/or support, equity means insuring they have what they need at the level they need it.*

REFLECTION

How do you define equity, personally and within your professional setting?

A common example: Instead of giving everyone the same pair of shoes, people need different shoes based on their foot size, purpose, climate, fashion sense, and other essential accommodations. You would not want someone with a size seven shoe who was going to a fancy gala to be given the same shoe as a person with a size twelve foot who works on a farm. Shoes would need to be tailored for different individuals in various contexts.

Another example is food portions for a growing child. I have been a single mom for most of my son's life. Food is an important part of our relationship. If ever my son is not hungry, there must be a serious problem. The amount of food I prepare is different from what I need, as he requires larger portions to accommodate his body. One staple food in our house is fish. When he was three, he would eat half a piece. Making fish for an eighteen-year-old man requires a minimum of four pieces with the option for seconds. I would get laughed out of my own home if I put a half piece of fish on his plate today. Like many Americans, I often struggle with maintaining an appropriate weight. As someone who could spare a couple of pieces of fish for my growing son, it really is about my willpower to make sure I do not eat more than I need and make sure he has seconds.

The term *equity* is often grouped with *diversity* and *inclusion*. Murray (2023) describes DEI work as "a three-pronged approach, which is why these terms are being used in so many of these new job titles." In this sense, **diversity** aims to "remove bias and barriers so that a company's workforce can reflect the heterogeneity of the communities it operates in." The strategy is to focus on hiring nontraditional candidates and ensuring they are compensated and offered the appropriate opportunities they need to thrive within the organization. **Inclusion** basically means that the organization invites and welcomes the ideas and attributes that arise as the organization diversifies.

Fernandes (2021), senior director of employer brand and culture and head of DEI Practice at Blu Ivy Group, also highlights the use of the "B" word, **belonging**. The money spent on DEI work often focuses on measuring DEI metrics, while missing the critical aspect of how people feel they belong in an organization. She suggests that we bring "together DEI and engagement experts to focus on DEI and engagement in a more holistic and effective way."

While the concepts of DEI seem simple, they have proven to be difficult to implement. For instance, those who always get what they need within an organization may fear that they will stop having their needs met as a result of DEI efforts. They fear having the extra they may be accustomed to receiving cut off as well. As Teresa Hopke (2022) noted in a *Forbes* article, nearly 70 percent of white men "report feeling 'forgotten' by diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts." They cite concerns about losing promotions or other benefits they might have expected before such efforts were implemented. Some white men resist Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) trainings because they feel blamed or shamed for their privileges. It highlights the zero-sum bias, where they perceive that giving opportunities to marginalized groups means fewer opportunities for them, leading to a desire for equality but with resistance to perceived preferential treatment.

People who have been accustomed to having their needs met (and beyond) typically make it difficult to "do the right thing" to achieve more equitable outcomes for others. This is where the challenges begin, but certainly not where they end.

From this point, in this book, I will mostly refer to Diversity, Equity and Inclusion, and other related titles as *equity*. This term is used as an umbrella term to capture the various titles used to describe DEI.

EQUITY AND LIFE'S "'ISMS" AND "OBIAS"

Those who resist equity tend to focus on maintaining the status quo, such as ensuring that those who do not have what they need are kept from getting it. The "isms" and "obias" of life have become the major barrier to creating more equitable outcomes for individuals and groups of marginalized people, specifically, "isms" and "obias" like racism, ableism, sexism, classism, homophobia, xenophobia, and nationalism. These describe a few of the ways people think about or treat others based on their identities. "Isms" are societal systems that marginalize others, while "obias"— conscious or unconscious prejudices—influence people's judgment and behavior toward others in an unfair way.

These impacts happen on a personal, organizational, and societal level. As a Black woman, I primarily face racism and sexism. Throughout this book, I will offer different ways to address the "isms" and "obias" of life, but especially within the educational context. Those seeking justice are committed to doing the right thing by working with both people who share their identity and those who do not.

Equity efforts have become a way for many to pursue justice in a variety of institutions, like corporations, schools, government agencies, healthcare, and the criminal justice system. With equity being popularized, society is thinking more critically about past inabilities to obtain equity for all. Obstacles to achieving such equity persist. As reported by the Equal Opportunity Employment Commission and *Harvard Business Review*, many people fear that if they were to admit or name their organization's failures and start asking tough questions, they could be targeted in a way that threatens their job security (Feldblum & Lipnic, 2016; Zheng, 2020). That is how equity work becomes political and ultimately marginalized.

EQUITY: THE EBBS AND FLOWS

Equity has become a part of most organization's standard operating procedures, particularly after the disparate impact of COVID-19 and the global resistance to violence against unarmed Black men and women displayed in 2020. As a past equity leader, my LinkedIn timeline is consistently flooded with organizations, companies, and institutions posting DEI chief, director, or manager positions to ensure that their organization is in line with the cultural shifts that are taking place. Maurer (2020) of The Society of Human Resource Management reported a spike in such roles following the watershed protests against the murder of George Floyd at the hands of the police. This growth is visible in the United States of America and can be seen globally. LinkedIn revealed that within the last five years, equity positions in Europe, the Middle East, and Africa have experienced a massive growth spurt, both at middle management and senior-level positions.

However, the momentum has slowed. In August 2023, Andrea Hsu (2023), labor and workplace correspondent for NPR, reported on corporate equity cutbacks:

> Economic pressures have led companies to pull back, cutting DEI jobs... alongside other human resources roles. Since last July, Indeed has seen DEI job postings drop by 38%.

> And then in June, in another blow to diversity advocates, the Supreme Court rejected the use of race-conscious admissions in higher education, setting off predictions that corporate policies around diversity will soon meet the same fate.

According to a LinkedIn study, the demand for chief diversity and inclusion officers increased by 168.9 percent between 2019 to 2022, but overall opportunities for these positions actually dropped by 4.51 percent between 2021 and 2022 (Anders, 2023). The same report details waning interest in diversity and inclusion due to recession concerns, fatigue, and high turnover rates. While diversity-related positions in this area ballooned, many who obtained them reported that they lacked the appropriate resources and supports for success.

This reduction could be connected to political backlash and economic constraints. In June 2023, Governor Greg Abbott of Texas signed a bill into law that bans DEI offices at public universities. This monumental action makes Texas the second state to take such drastic actions against equity efforts, with Florida being the first. This change means that DEI offices, programs, and training at these institutions will cease to exist. The students and staff who were empowered by these efforts will be left completely without recourse, and those who led DEI efforts at the university will be left without jobs.

Anti-equity measures have not stopped there. In June 2023, the US Supreme Court overturned an important law that provided more equitable outcomes in college admissions. Less than sixty years ago, US colleges and universities were officially desegregated with the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Higher Education Act of 1965. Even after the codification of desegregation, barriers for people of color persisted. It has

been documented that BIPOCs have been negatively impacted by racism and discrimination in college admissions. Yet, the *Students for Fair Admissions, Inc. v. President and Fellows of Harvard College* has eliminated race as a consideration in college admissions. The implications of this decision will have a long-lasting impact on college admissions for BIPOCs.

REFLECTION

In broader society, how have you witnessed equity efforts persist or wane in the last decade? How does that compare to your personal or professional context?

GET SET! ARE WE READY?

An organization's readiness for equity work is wide-ranging. In many cases, organizations have technical goals for achieving more equitable outcomes, but they lack an understanding of the complex issues they face, and struggle with the discomfort of vested stakeholders. Hiring equity leaders can be a good starting point for an organization, company, or institution. At the same time, equity leaders can become the "sage on the stage" responsible for moving an agenda with financial and human resources but limited to making minimal changes. From my observations and experiences, to attain true change, it is up to leaders and individuals to enact equity within their spheres of control and influence.

In these times, most educational institutions have considered or already initiated strategic planning and professional development in equity. As previously mentioned, this work may be contested depending on the state's political climate. This is not a "how to" equity strategy book. The book's intent is to help strengthen the resolve of individuals and groups to implement the needed actions to bring about equitable change. This book can assist readers in discovering a starting place within your sphere of influence and control, as well as a pathway to the sustainability of equity efforts.

PROGRAMS, POLICIES, AND PROCEDURES DO NOT CHANGE PRACTICES. PEOPLE DO!

In May 2020, the spotlight on DEI was heightened as the world, workplaces, and schools struggled to make sense of the recorded murder of George Floyd. Many people who had always seen themselves as good, decent, and fair human beings wanted to uncover deeper truths about race, police brutality, and systemic racism, and they searched for ways to learn more amid the COVID-19 pandemic shutdown. As many people reached for resources to gain new understanding, they bought *How to Become Antiracist* by Ibram X. Kendi (2019) and *White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism* by Robin Diangelo (2018). In June 2020, Kendi's book became a top seller in multiple major outlets (*New York Times* best seller list, *USA Today*, and Amazon). Similarly, *White Fragility* experienced multiple weeks as a *New York Times* best seller. Both books address race. This opened the door to many books and professional development training programs across all industries on topics related to uncovering and correcting long-standing societal injustices.

While I was equipped with a strong academic and research background, I quickly learned that practical tools were needed to support an entire organization on a journey of understanding and implementing the changes needed to increase equitable outcomes for students, families, and the community we served. One of the most useful tools in my work was *Courageous Conversations About Race* (CCAR) by Glenn Singleton (2021). Members from the district's Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) team initially did book studies on this book and introduced it to me. With their help, we were able to arrange state-sponsored training. It was an extremely impactful training. Ultimately, we were able to get some central service administrators, school board, and other community members trained on the book's protocol. After I left the role, the district adopted a train-the-trainer model, and all certified and classified district employees are now required to undergo training sessions on the CCAR framework.

CCAR (Singleton, 2021) offers a healthy way to engage in productive conversations about race. The most recent edition addresses deeper inequities exposed after the pandemic shutdown. This book contains the original components of the CCAR

protocol which includes a compass, four agreements, and six conditions that provide a foundation for positive dialogue. It is written in an accessible style that anyone can understand and is applicable to settings even beyond education. The compass is an excellent way to understand that all people come from different vantage points into this work. Additionally, the agreements are a structuring tool for setting a foundational stage for valuable conversations that can potentially be sensitive.

REFLECTION

What are the most useful tools you have at your disposal to address inequities within your work setting?

As powerful as this training is, if individual people are not committed to the process or leaders do not hold their staff accountable, no changes are made in practice. My mother always said to me as I grew up, "More of the same, produces no change." The Equity Empowerment Continuum is a tool that can help people determine their capacity to "do the right thing." I found people who were resistant to ideas of equity were also resistant to the training. Some people walked away from the trainings and follow-ups and never used the protocol. However, they "checked the box" and met the requirement by participating in the sessions.

After all the training, discussions, and debates about how to create a more equitable environment, the real area of focus is about what the individual or team of individuals will *do*. This book will help you determine to what extent you and others are willing to "do the right thing" to bring the change you seek to impact.