

Preface

In 2009, it was my great honor to be named an “Equity Champion” by the Educational Equity Center of the Academy for Educational Development. I recall, in preparing my remarks for the gathering to celebrate this award, that I struggled with the term “equity” as a way to describe the work that people do, because it needs to be done, to create a just society and enact social justice. What is equity? What is the meaning of this word? What does it mean to achieve equity? I frequently discuss this term with my husband Peter and with friends. Yet, I cannot fully describe it nor translate it into just one word, as we do in English, for my mother in Colombia. I always have to use examples and tell many stories about certain actions or decisions; I describe it as way of thinking, of feeling, and of behaving. But if that is the case, then how does one grow into or learn this way of thinking and behaving? How did I learn these feelings? Why am I—and most members of my immediate and adopted family, as well as my closest colleagues and friends—so intolerant of inequity and exclusion—and how did we get that way? In preparing this preface, I was brought again to reflect on these questions, to ponder again deeply the meaning of equity and social justice.

In terms of equity in education—I believe that it holds (or should hold) a special meaning for all of us in this profession. We are in the education profession because we all choose/chose to do this equity work in one form or another. For some of us, equity and social justice are about excellent education, maximum opportunity for the largest and most possibly diverse group of learners. It is about preparation for having choices in life, access to work, housing, health, or the right to vote. It is also about participation, representation, and inclusion in important decisions and endeavors. It is about gender, about physical and mental health, about religion or language, and about freedom to choose our partners and life styles. Ultimately, I define equity and social justice as the infusion of whatever it takes to make things right and to make things fair, at a given time, in a particular place, and for the greater good.

Still, I realize the shortcomings or limitations of language for describing what a community of compassionate people needs to know, be, and act upon to make, to do, the right thing. Yet, in this collection of wisdom and knowledge from colleagues who have dedicated their life’s work to minding the children and all that

surrounds them or affects them in education and social policy, there are many ways of articulating, envisioning, and enacting social justice. Readers will either personally connect or intellectually identify with some of the perspectives offered by these authors; all will definitely find scholarly angles and definitions they had not considered before as a part of what they need to know to advance a just society.

Each section of the book is a point of entry for individuals with different passions and expertise, but each point of entry calls for compassion. Compassion is the prerequisite and foundation for appreciating and finding one's place of action in one or more of the perspectives presented in this volume. Why is compassion a requirement? Because in the absence of compassion, it often becomes too easy to rationalize ways to avoid what must be done, to turn away, or expect solutions to come from others. Compassion motivates us to act. We know it when we feel it or summon it at a random moment. It may be contained within a brief moment of recognition that someone needs our help and we are moved to intercede just because it is the right thing to do. But for educators, compassion cannot simply be collections of random moments. Compassion needs to be built into our policies, programs, and assessments. Informed compassion will help us question punitive teaching and policies, recognize oppression, and, when something seems dangerous or harmful, compassion will compel us to try to step in and stop it. These I believe are the imperatives behind this book.

Its audience should be anyone who feels that the challenge of difficult times renders us powerless to make the just decisions that affect other people in general and vulnerable people in particular. Yet, we are not powerless but sometimes have difficulty finding our way to positive action. The voices in this book speak of positive action and of hopefulness. As a whole, the book exemplifies foundations of education and a demonstration of the complex ecologies that must be considered to best meet the needs, find the strengths, and act on behalf of children, families, and the caregivers and schools educating vulnerable children placed in our care.

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