1. The Intersection of Self and Systems

The first Critical Driver that supports *Building for Equity* is the Intersection of Self and Systems. This may also be described as an individual's "positionality."[7] In this driver, we learn who we are within larger systems, including systems of privilege and oppression, which in turn helps us to be prepared to build equitable schools and to disrupt the factors that led to broken schools in the first place.

We strongly urge groups to resist the temptation to bypass self-discovery in order to focus immediately and exclusively on tangible steps. Certainly, the people who initiate a redesign process are among the most motivated to begin *right away.* Typically, two or three educators or administrators coming together kindle the start of a school design or redesign process. Maybe the collaboration is triggered by problems—so-called achievement gaps, for example, or a worrisome school climate—or maybe by a sense of idealism, the desire to make positive change for the benefit of students. The first step seems obvious: to form a team and launch the process. In this excitement, and the impatience that external pressures may inspire, self-discovery is easy to overlook. However, other innovations for equity will likely founder if the team bypasses critical mindset, identity, and systems learning.

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The design team, whether nascent or long established, will have the heavy responsibility of a school redesign with equitable outcomes as its central focus. This necessitates that each team member has a deep awareness of their individual identity and the ways identity impacts teaching and learning, relationships in general, and ultimately the design project. While establishing trust is an important part of any team process, self-discovery is about understanding the impacts of our own beliefs and values. The practice of broadening and deepening our understanding of our individual selves within systems increases our awareness of the impact of implicit biases and our ability to resist the potential of an unjust assignment of dominance and subordination being replicated in a new school design or redesign.

Some members of the design team may be absolute beginners in this work, while others may be more experienced and further along in the process of discovering self as related to systems. Often, this work is a balance between taking a unified approach and ensuring that individuals have the space to grow. Phase 1, Step 2 of our redesign process focuses on this exact balance, which may be helpful to groups developing a learning plan. This chapter, however, contains resources appropriate for those earlier in the learning process.

The resources and guidance provided here offer an entry point for exploring aspects of identity and their potential impacts on group dynamics and educational systems. This chapter can be a primer for new design teams as well as inspiration for individual professional learning plans that we explore more fully in Phase 1. However, readings and resources are no substitute for a deep, facilitated process of understanding the impact of who we are has on the systems in which we exist; this work is best done with an experienced facilitator supporting the participants through professional development modules, experiences, and tough conversations. If this facilitated work occurs in tandem with the Equitable Redesign Cycle, then the two processes mutually enrich each other in myriad tangible ways. The guidance below can provide an important foundation for either or both of these processes.

7 We define "positionality" as one's position in a group, within a wider sociopolitical context, as determined by identities such as race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, ability, and other innate or perceived attributes.

Framing Work toward a Deeper Understanding of Self

Understanding the implications of how one's personal and group identities determine one's positionality as an individual ultimately informs our awareness of how positionality impacts teaching and leadership practice, and more importantly our development in becoming equity-minded educators. Just as we develop habits of behavior through those who raise us, our values and beliefs are informed by them, as well as by our wider society, and we all develop biases. Biases or associations are the brain's way of ultimately allowing us to protect ourselves, and as a result *we do not know what we do not know*. Until we embark on this work, we remain limited in our ability to create equity-centered classrooms and schools.

Personal identity work begins with deepening our understanding of how identity is defined in our world and how it informs our interactions with others and theirs with us. Our society puts a value on all the dimensions that define us, whether gender, religion, race, marital status or any other aspect of our identities. Identities fall into either **dominant** or **subordinate** categories across these dimensions, and we are socialized to associate being "normal" with dominance. Doing personal identity work gives us a lens into how we are positioned in the various parts of our lives and society. In turn, it opens our eyes to how *others* experience, and are positioned within, the world. From the exercise of *personal identity work*, members of the design team can take away understanding of how their beliefs and values are shaped; a heightened awareness of unexplored biases and blind spots they each possess; and a deeper appreciation of their positionality as educators and community members. For educators in particular, we see the ultimate goal of this step as preparing them to lead their students in challenging dominant perspectives and developing a critical consciousness.

Exploring dominant and subordinate designations may begin with topics that the group is more comfortable exploring.

The ultimate goal of this step is to lead students in challenging dominant perspectives and developing a critical consciousness.

These topics will be culturally dependent.[8] Some groups have a relatively easy time exploring being male in contrast to female, for example. Other potential contrasts to explore may include

- Formal and informal education experiences (e.g., college educated in contrast to those who did not attend an institute for higher education)
- English proficiency (fluent in contrast to learning)
- Christian and non-Christian religious affiliation
- Sexuality (heterosexual in contrast with other sexual preferences)
- Gender identity (cisgender[9] in contrast with other gender identities)
- Race and ethnicity

While all aspects of our identities deserve analysis, race is a topic groups often avoid—and it becomes more difficult to explore the longer it goes *un*explored. As a result, racial identity requires an explicit focus. In our racialized society, all of us must face the reality and impacts of our own and others' racial identity. And understanding the self is only the first step: with racial and other designations come privilege or a lack of privilege, related to dominant and subordinate designations.

Any "self-work" must begin with a period of self-reflection and deepening personal understanding. It is also valuable to do this work with others who are on the path of deepening their understanding of personal identity, which is ideal in the context of a design team. Such collaboration, however, must be coupled with the expectation that all sharing is voluntary. Moreover, the group must continue to engage in trust building, along with the early generative work of school design, in tandem with the "self-work" that informs it. While it is paramount that this work be voluntary, it's equally true that these kinds of reflections are imperative to the transformation needed to become a true equity leader—in schools or otherwise.[10]

In the following paragraphs, we outline some entry points—tools and exercises individuals can use independently as well as within the design team context. Some of these are primarily appropriate for educators (and may even be appropriate for those not currently part of the design team), while others are applicable to any design team member, regardless of role.

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8 This guide is created for an American context; dominant and subordinate identities may be very different in other cultural contexts. For example, in different countries, different religions would be "dominant" or normalized.

9 Cisgender persons are those whose gender identity matches that assigned at birth.

10 In fact, if a person opts out of "self-work" around the intersection of self and systems, they may not be sufficiently capable of contributing to an equity-focused school redesign project.

Approaches to Identity Exploration

Developing an understanding of the aspects of identity, and how identity relates to the value society places on one's role and personal characteristics, is a powerful way of understanding our positionality in the world. How we are positioned determines our level of power, privilege, and even our perceived credibility.

In the Intersection of Self and Systems Reflection Guide provided in this toolkit, we describe one suggested process of individual reflection to support the navigation of some of the readings recommended in this chapter of the guide. While some exercises and resources are described in more detail below, this guide can serve as a handy starting place, particularly useful for those individuals just beginning their journey to understand positionality; that is, the intersection of self and (social) systems.

"A Working Conceptualization of Historically Excluded and Historically Included Groups"[11] can be valuable early exercise in exploring power and privilege. This table introduces examples of dominant and subordinate identity aspects that exist within various individual and group identities. It is powerful to consider our positionality, particularly if we haven't thought deeply about it previously. The comparisons in this table allow individuals to gain a sense of how they are and have been positioned in our society. These reflection questions deepen one's understanding of these concepts.

For many groups working toward equity in education, race becomes a central concept of identity exploration, related to the fundamental role that structural racism and white supremacy play in upholding inequitable educational systems. While it is often difficult for group members, particularly for people who identify as white, to have conversations related to race, it is necessary when doing personal identity work to be open to and willing to examine this part of our identity. We live in a racialized society, and we cannot fully understand the positionality of our own identity if we don't understand our racial identity. How we understand the significance of racial differences, and the interactions across these differences, informs our ability to develop a critical consciousness and awareness of dominant structures that shape our roles and institutions. As a result, continued exploration into identity necessitates a particularly deep dive into issues of race.

The topic of race is best broached with the aid of time-tested and reliable resources. The classic Beverly Tatum book *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria*[12] is an excellent resource for educators working to deepen their understanding of the impact our personal identities have in our schools and classrooms, with a specific emphasis on race. Chapter 2 of the book, for example, provides insight into how dominant and subordinate identities develop and how we are conditioned to operate within these contexts until our awareness is raised; and the whole book offers a valuable deep dive into racial dynamics within schools. One successful approach to using this book or other complex texts in the context of school design is to initiate a reading and discussion group for the book, including text-based discussions about select portions.

> *We live in a racialized society, and we cannot fully understand the positionality of our own identity if we don't understand our racial identity.*

In order to fully understand our own development within the social construct of race, it is important to understand racial identity development models. For design teams wanting to explore different models together as a gateway to deeper learning for individuals, we recommend "Summary of Stages of Racial Identity Development,"[13] which covers a variety of frameworks. Janet Helms's model, included in the document, was developed specifically for people who identify as white; James Cross's model outlines the development of people of color. Individuals on the design team can work to deepen their self-awareness of their own identity development by reflecting on their own place within the appropriate framework at various stages in life, and meeting with one or two others on the design team from the same affinity group.[14] Members can then reflect with the same colleague(s) on periods when they were in different parts of the model, and ideas they have for their own self-growth based on this reflection and awareness.

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11 This table was developed by Valerie Batts of Visions, Inc., and appears in her presentation "Awareness of Self as a Cultural Being," delivered at the Foundations of Infant Mental Health Training Program, Central California Children's Institute, Fresno State, March 7, 2013, https://www.fresnostate.edu/chhs/ccci/documents/Dr.Valerie.Batts.03.07.13.powerpoint.presentation.pdf.

12 Beverly Tatum, *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria and Other Conversations about Race* (New York: Basic Books, 1997, updated 2017).

13 Racial Equity Tools, "Summary of Stages of Racial Identity Development," https://www.racialequitytools.org/resourcefiles/Compilation_of_Racial_Identity_Models_7_15_11.pdf. Racial Equity Tools (racialequitytools.org) is a compendium of many great resources, frameworks, and tools around the topic of racial equity, including education-related work but also work in many other fields.

14 In this context, affinity groups refer to subgroups of individuals with the same identity—in this case, by specific racial/ethnic identity, or simply as white persons or people of color.

Self and Systems

Another component of identity work is beginning to understand the dynamics of privilege and power and our place in these dynamics: in other words, our positionality. Our positionality determines the amount and depth of privilege we hold. For example, individuals who are formally educated possess a level of credibility and credentials that allow them access to higher paying jobs and higher expectations from others. Peggy McIntosh's 1988 article "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack"[15] remains a go-to resource for bringing light to the privileges white families experience both in and out of the school setting. Gary Howard's book *We Can't Teach What We Don't Know* is another text that helps the reader to understand the three areas of personal identity exploration described in this chapter: dominant and subordinate identity, racial identity development, and privilege.[16]

At the end of this guide (in the Supportive Reading and Resources section) is an **Intersection of Self and Systems Personal Learning Guide**, which includes suggested reflection questions for some of the common readings featured in this section. This resource can be a valuable starting place for individuals seeking to deepen their understanding within this Critical Driver.

When we develop an understanding of our own—and therefore others'—identity, positionality, and privilege level, we have a fuller appreciation of how implicit biases operate in our everyday lives. A foundational resource for understanding implicit biases can be participation in, and open discussion about, the Implicit association test at Project Implicit. Video resources that can support design team members in analyzing and reflecting on their understanding of bias and how biases impact the way we interact with our students, their families, and our colleagues include UCLA DEI Implicit Bias video lessons and a TED talk entitled "How to Overcome Our Biases? Walk Boldly toward Them," by Vernā Meyers.

To be effective and culturally responsive, an educator—or design team member—must explore their personal identity, better understand others' identities, and gain an appreciation of how our educational systems reinforce dominant perspectives. It takes courage to delve into these topics. Raising our personal awareness of identity and positionality can be a lonely journey. Creating opportunities for ourselves to share new ideas and learnings with individuals who are on the same journey can both lessen the challenges of this work and, more importantly, propel us forward in our growth and development. This is where the team becomes an asset. Phase 1 of the redesign process provides additional structures to support collaboration, especially around topics like race and identity, where individuals may be in very different places on the continuum of learning and which require a high level of trust to explore.

The value of the undertaking, however, is profound. Norming these difficult conversations will allow us to create and recreate schools that are culturally competent and equitable. When we raise topics of social justice and critical consciousness, we must be able to talk about all aspects of identity, and to understand the perspectives from which others experience the world. The understanding and empathy acquired by "self and systems work" is an important lever in achieving successful outcomes.

Supportive Structures

For schools and districts moving toward a deeper understanding of the intersection of self and systems, some of the following structures and approaches will support this critical but challenging work:

- **Leadership engagement.** While classroom teachers must be engaged in this learning, efforts at change founder without deep commitment and congruent learning from school- and district-level leaders.

- **Professional development and facilitation.** External professional development and facilitation can be an important asset to self and systems learning. Often, groups benefit from the support of two facilitators, one white and one a person of color, to help all participants navigate conversations about race.

- **Affinity groups.** When covering issues such as race/ethnicity, gender, and other sensitive topics, groups often can benefit from providing spaces in which those who identify as the dominant group can engage in separate conversations and work from those in "subordinate" groups.

- **Studying whiteness.** Especially in predominantly white schools and districts, deepening an understanding of "whiteness" is an important endeavor to pursue alongside improving the understanding of other races, ethnicities, and cultures. Some of the resources mentioned in this section can support this work.

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15 Peggy McIntosh, "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack" (Wellesley, MA: Wellesley College Center, 1998), https://www.racialequitytools.org/resourcefiles/mcintosh.pdf.

16 Gary Howard, *We Can't Teach What We Don't Know* (New York: Teacher's College Press, 2015).

Additional Recommended Reading

- *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria and Other Conversations about Race*, by Beverly Daniel Tatum (Basic Books, 2017)

- *Walking the Equity Talk: A Guide for Culturally Courageous Conversations in School Communities*, by John Robert Browne (Corwin, 2012)

- *Everyday Antiracism: Getting Real about Race in School*, edited by Mica Pollock (New Press, 2008)

- *The Guide for White Women Who Teach Black Boys*, by Eddie Moore Jr., Ali Michael, and Marguerite W. Penick-Parks (Corwin, 2018)

- *The Latinization of Schools*, by Jason Irizarry (Routledge, 2016)

- *White Fragility*, by Robin DiAngelo (Beacon, 2018)

- *The New Jim Crow*, by Michelle Alexander (New Press, 2012)

- *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America*, by Ibram X. Kendi, published by Nation Books (Nation Books, 2016)

- *For White Folks Who Teach in the Hood . . . And the Rest of Y'all Too*, by Chris Emdin (Beacon, 2017)