

WHAT YOUR COLLEAGUES ARE SAYING . . .

“The journey of school and district leadership requires a multitude of skills and capacities. Ababio-Fernandez and Winkfield take us into a depth of skills and capacities that are reminiscent of abolitionist education. The focus of abolitionists was to end the practice of physical slavery as a means of impacting cognitive slavery that presumed superiority or inferiority based on race and ethnicity. Ababio-Fernandez and Winkfield highlight the five pillars of leadership that require an abolitionist orientation necessary for an equity leader to build a free person’s education. They center the realities of self-discovery, inside-outside approach, and healing as the endeavor of what schools can do in this abolitionist movement.”

Edward Fergus Arcia

Author of *Solving Disproportionality and Achieving Equity*
Professor, Department of Urban Education
School of Arts and Sciences, Rutgers University

“The authors mention that there are many examples and guideposts in the history and evolution of this country’s search for its soul. I count this book among them. *Shifting Self and System: How Educational Leaders Propel Excellence for Achieving Equity* offers clarity and truth, and it will equip school leaders with the necessary tools to move beyond the performative to developing and sustaining the will and skill to persist in this work courageously, even—and especially—in the face of resistance.

This book is an absolute gift! Through their shared experiences as school leaders, core considerations, case studies, discussion questions, as well as independent and collaborative practices, the authors invite readers on a journey that includes fearlessly honest introspection, vulnerability, and humility leading to holistic, sustained transformation with a focus on healing and wholeness. I give this book my highest recommendation!”

Afrika Afeni-Mills

“There are a lot of books out there that purport to give you answers, but this one really does. Not the answers that make the hard stuff seem easy, but the kind of answers that make you face hard truths, look at yourself in the mirror, and commit to persevere. This is the book we need, at the exact time we need it, by the people we

need to hear from, for the people who need it most. It is a must-read for any educator or education leader who is dissatisfied with the status quo.”

Sasha Rabkin

President, Equal Opportunity Schools

“If you genuinely care about equity, this book is for you. Infused with real-life stories, research, and solutions, *Shifting Self and System: How Educational Leaders Propel Excellence for Achieving Equity* will challenge you to reflect on how one shows up in our own lives and the lives we’ve been charged to impact. It is refreshingly honest and unapologetic. Ultimately, there will never be equality without equity—Dr. Ruby Ababio-Fernandez and Courtney Winkfield get it!”

Shanell Dunns

National Children and Community Advocacy
Expert and CEO of Roots & Bridges

“Working toward equity is a journey, not a destination. The authors of *Shifting Self and System* paint a picture of just what that journey entails. Through personal stories and deep analysis, the authors illustrate what it can look like to uproot educational injustice through a shift in the system and ourselves. The authors acknowledge historical truths, bring an honest assessment of the pitfalls related to leading for equity and provide a path forward rooted in possibility, humanity, sustainability, and justice. For those looking for ways to make change in comprehensive ways, I recommend taking a deep dive into this text.”

Jamila Dugan

Leadership Coach and Co-Author of *Street Data: A Next-Generation Model for Equity, Pedagogy, and School Transformation*

“*Shifting Self and System: How Educational Leaders Propel Excellence for Achieving Equity* will shorten the educator’s required journey on becoming an adaptive leader to serve the students with whom they are entrusted. Dr. Ruby Ababio-Fernandez and Courtney Winkfield have the origin stories and experience to prepare our educators through adapted leadership to ensure that all students thrive in a 21st century where AI, robotics, and automation require that they are seen and supported as STEM-capable, regardless of their origin stories.”

Marlon Lindsay

CEO, 21stCentEd

“This book reminds us that everyone needs healing and all of us can lead system change initiatives from the inside out. The authors guide us into thinking deeply about the personal mirror work that each of us must do to drive systems changes in our education systems. Dr. Ruby Ababio-Fernandez and Courtney Winkfield’s vulnerability and empathy shine through their courageous storytelling and reflections. They present an opportunity for us (agents of change) to see ourselves as authentic human beings who can engage in truth-telling while leaning into the transformation work of system change necessary to better youth no matter their needs. The book offers practical and focused strategies that help to create the change we want to see. We are presented with an invitation to wash our faces, see who we really are, and bring others along with us.”

Maurice Swinney

Chief Innovation Officer, Chicago Beyond

“The authors offer windows into a collective human experience that unites our histories and futures. A refreshing perspective at the intersection of identity, spirituality, and the developing leader. Bold, poignant, and nuanced in its call for self-mastery as a pathway to transformative leadership in contemporary times.

Systems are made of people. When systems have missioned aligned, healed humans, they function well. There isn’t a single stand of racial awareness or strategy—one must fully understand herself, her place in the world, and what she is meant to uniquely contribute within systems. Only then can systems provide quality and efficacy.

Some of the best leaders of our time ask us to consider our relationship to ambiguity. Throughout the text, this theme shines. How does leadership manage/lead dynamically?

Shame and hope can coexist. They can both be true at the same time.”

Dia Bryant

Executive Director EdTrust, New York

“*Shifting Self and Systems* is a must-read book that offers actionable tools for transformative leadership that center racial equity, healing, and the power of the collective so that our nation's students—especially the most marginalized—receive a quality education that honors their full, authentic selves.”

Dena Simmons

Founder of LiberatED

“I have never experienced a book with so many tangible suggestions for improvement of practice, such reflective and effective reflection prompts, so many real examples of the theory in practice, and such insightful analysis of the actions taken in each case study. If you are a leader committed to transforming education into a liberating, revolutionary, and humanizing institution—why haven’t you bought this book yet?”

Mari Ann Banks

District Equity Director,
City Schools of Decatur

Do not copy, post, or distribute

Shifting Self and System



Do not copy, post, or distribute

Do not copy, post, or distribute

Shifting Self and System

How Educational Leaders Propel
Excellence for Achieving Equity



Dr. Ruby Ababio-Fernandez

Courtney Winkfield

CORWIN

Copyright ©2024 by SAGE Publications, Inc.

This work may not be reproduced or distributed in any form or by any means without express written permission of the publisher.

FOR INFORMATION:

Corwin
A SAGE Company
2455 Teller Road
Thousand Oaks, California 91320
(800) 233-9936
www.corwin.com

SAGE Publications Ltd.
1 Oliver's Yard
55 City Road
London EC1Y 1SP
United Kingdom

SAGE Publications India Pvt. Ltd.
Unit No 323-333, Third Floor, F-Block
International Trade Tower Nehru Place
New Delhi 110 019
India

SAGE Publications Asia-Pacific Pte. Ltd.
18 Cross Street #10-10/11/12
China Square Central
Singapore 048423

Vice President and Editorial Director: Monica Eckman
Program Director and Publisher: Dan Alpert
Content Development Manager: Lucas Schleicher
Content Development Editor: Mia Rodriguez
Senior Editorial Assistant: Natalie Delpino
Editorial Intern: Lex Nunez
Production Editor: Tori Mirsadjadi
Copy Editor: Amy Hanquist Harris
Typesetter: C&M Digitals (P) Ltd.
Indexer: Integra
Cover Designer: Candice Harman
Icons: iStock.com/iSidhe
Marketing Manager: Melissa Duclos

Copyright © 2024 by Corwin Press, Inc.

All rights reserved. Except as permitted by U.S. copyright law, no part of this work may be reproduced or distributed in any form or by any means, or stored in a database or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

When forms and sample documents appearing in this work are intended for reproduction, they will be marked as such. Reproduction of their use is authorized for educational use by educators, local school sites, and/or noncommercial or nonprofit entities that have purchased the book.

All third-party trademarks referenced or depicted herein are included solely for the purpose of illustration and are the property of their respective owners. Reference to these trademarks in no way indicates any relationship with, or endorsement by, the trademark owner.

Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Ababio-Fernandez, Ruby, author. | Winkfield, Courtney, author.

Title: Shifting self and system : how educational leaders propel excellence for achieving equity / Ruby Ababio-Fernandez, Courtney Winkfield.

Description: Thousand Oaks, California : Corwin, [2024] | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2023028298 | ISBN 9781071858141 (paperback ; alk. paper) | ISBN 9781071858158 (epub) | ISBN 9781071858189 (epub) | ISBN 9781071858165 (pdf)

Subjects: LCSH: Discrimination in education—United States. | Racism in education—United States. | Multicultural education—United States. | Equality—United States. | Educational leadership—United States.

Classification: LCC LC212.2 .A23 2024 | DDC 370.1170973—dc23/eng/20230705
LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2023028298>

This book is printed on acid-free paper.

23 24 25 26 27 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

DISCLAIMER: This book may direct you to access third-party content via Web links, QR codes, or other scannable technologies, which are provided for your reference by the author(s). Corwin makes no guarantee that such third-party content will be available for your use and encourages you to review the terms and conditions of such third-party content. Corwin takes no responsibility and assumes no liability for your use of any third-party content, nor does Corwin approve, sponsor, endorse, verify, or certify such third-party content.

Contents

Acknowledgments	xi
About the Authors	xv
Introduction	1
Icons Used in This Book	14
Pillar 1. The Journey to Self-Mastery	15
Pillar 2. Adaptive Leadership	31
Pillar 3. The Training Chase: Pitfalls and Possibilities of Equity Work	55
Pillar 4. Emergence: Focusing on the Power of the Collective	85
Pillar 5. Mastering Healing for a Better Humanity	111
Epilogue: The Only Way Through Is Through	139
References	143
Index	147

Do not copy, post, or distribute

Acknowledgments

Acknowledgments and Gratitudes From Dr. Ruby

This journey, this work, and particularly living it in pursuit of justice and Black liberation is no easy feat. But the small miracles in being reminded that I am professionally and personally surrounded by care, love, and a group of phenomenal people who serve as fuel for my resilience, joy, and genius make it all worthwhile. For that, I owe a debt of gratitude to so many people.

To our Corwin team for the support throughout this process, especially Mike, Dan, and Sonja for believing there was power in telling our story.

Each member of my village (near and far) has shaped a lifelong journey and created conditions for my inescapable adult learning, development, and purposeful living. My life beats on because of my family. To my parents, Ababios and Johanneys, all my siblings, uncles, aunts, cousins, and grandmamas (Ama Ye and Adwoa Pokua)—an incredible collection of humans who have been a strong foundation for actualizing my higher self in this world: You have selflessly shown me that, when you believe in someone, you bet your everything on them. I am eternally grateful and indebted for enabling all that I continue to become.

For the women who always saved and mended my spirit, keeping my crown straight no matter the circumstance: Moms (Mary Agyei-Asantewah and Akosua Ohenewa), Muriel, Cheryl, Nikki, Cynthia, Sonia, Court, Nana Sakara, Tia, Etta! Your amazing way of loving me reminds me that nothing's impossible, and the greatness I come from is divinely feminine.

I dedicate this to all of the children in my life: my godchildren, nieces and nephews, baby cousins, and those I have yet to know. To my boys,

to whom I owe everything about my evolution: my purpose is driven by you, my forever babies. The sun will always rise and set to you, Mecca and Wisdom. You are the breath of my life, and I couldn't have done this for or with anyone else. I have cleared the path for you to go beyond the possible! Keep the ancestors smiling.

Ade a nyame de ahye wo nsamu no, onipa ntumi nngye da.

Acknowledgments and Gratitudes From Courtney

Writing this book has been a journey, and I am both humbled and grateful for the opportunity to share these stories, these lessons, and this call to action with the world. I could not have done it without the help and support of so many remarkable people.

Thank you to our incredible team at Corwin. Dan and Megan, you held us in such care, honoring the baby we sought to birth long before we could fully see it in its complete form. Your kindness, wisdom, and encouragement made this a project centered in love.

I want to thank my mentors and guides, especially the powerful women across twenty years who saw something in me, something I often didn't see myself, and pushed and held me along the way. I want to especially thank Carolyn, Sonia, and Karen whose guidance, wisdom, and time have been invaluable to me. Your generosity of spirit and commitment to excellence through coaching and feedback have inspired me to continuously strive for my own growth and development.

To my writing partner, dear friend, and one of the most badass women I have ever known . . . Ruby, thank you for your creativity, intelligence, and humor. I am not sure either of us could have ever imagined the eventual braiding of our paths when we met all those years ago, but I can only thank the divine for bringing your light to mine. I am grateful for the partnership we have formed and cannot wait for our work together to continue to unfold.

My heart is full of gratitude to my husband and best friend David, who has been my rock and my mirror throughout this process. Your unwavering support and encouragement have sustained me through the ups and downs of writing, and I am so grateful to have had you as my true partner for the past twenty years.

To my children, Henry and Eleanor, every step of this journey has been for, and about, you. The two of you represent everything that is possible in creating a fairer, more just, more critical, and more curious world. You both challenge and inspire me every single day and are the essence of why I do everything I do.

Finally, I want to thank my mother and say her name here: Kathy McDaniel Caughran. Your earliest example showed me the power in centering another's humanity above all else. You left me stories, questions, and bread crumbs for me to return to in order to find my way home to a more complete version of my own story and history when I was ready to hear and understand the truth. You have, and always will, serve as my earliest model of what it means to disrupt a long, painful line of ancestral legacy, and I will always credit you for sending my journey in another direction. I know you are with me, have been with me, always.

Publisher's Acknowledgments

Corwin gratefully acknowledges the contributions of the following reviewers:

Elizabeth Alvarez
Superintendent, Forest Park District 91
Chicago, IL

Amanda Austin
Principal, Iberville Parish School Board
Addis, LA

Mari Ann Banks
District Equity Director, City Schools of Decatur
Decatur, GA

Rebecca Cohen
School Counselor, PPS
Portland, OR

Ericca Dent
2nd Grade Teacher, Burbank Unified School District
Burbank, CA

Virginia E. Kelsen
Assistant Superintendent, Glendora Unified School District
Claremont, CA

Michele Thomas
Headteacher, Pembroke Dock Community School
Wales, UK

Do not copy, post, or distribute

About the Authors



Dr. Ruby Ababio-Fernandez is the executive vice president of programming and development at Courageous Conversation® and comes to the work with over twenty-three years of educational experience and an unyielding commitment to a vision of transforming lives of adults and children as well as transforming communities and school systems. Dr. Ababio-Fernandez served as associate vice president

for equity and leadership development for the New York City Leadership Academy (NYCLA) before her transition to the role as deputy superintendent and senior executive officer of the Office of Equity and Access (OEA) for New York City's Department of Education. Her extensive portfolio includes the citywide Implicit Bias Initiative, Advanced Placement for All, DREAM-Specialized High Schools Institute, as well as several youth development programs.

Dr. Ababio-Fernandez's leadership in confronting racial inequities helped forge new paths for developing the will, skill, knowledge, and dispositions needed to achieve educational equity for underrepresented and underserved students, families, and communities. As chief strategy officer of NYC's Department of Education, Dr. Ababio-Fernandez directly supported the chancellor of schools in creating and managing

a comprehensive and coherent vision for the agency and in developing effective leaders to advance racial equity.

Dr. Ababio-Fernandez earned a bachelor's degree in English from Framingham St. College, a master's degree in curriculum and instruction with specialization in literacy from Lesley University, a master's in educational leadership studies, and a doctorate in urban educational leadership from Teachers College, Columbia University. She currently resides in New York with her family.



Courtney Winkfield is a veteran educator, executive coach, and racial equity leader with over twenty years experience leading at the school and district levels in public education systems. Winkfield has helped develop strategic initiatives and strategies to address long-standing racial, ethnic, and socio-economic disparities and

promote equity and excellence in education through policy and advocacy, both within and outside of the NYC Department of Education. From 2006 to 2016, Winkfield served as a founding teacher, assistant principal, and principal of the Academy for Young Writers, a public secondary school in East New York, Brooklyn.

Under Winkfield's leadership as principal, young writers took significant steps toward expanding opportunities for young people, including increasing the number of AP courses offered, creating multiple STEM pathways for students of all abilities, developing a nationally recognized 6–12 Gender-Sexuality Alliance to empower and give voice to LGBTQ+ students, and establishing a student-led restorative justice program. She holds a bachelor's degree in English from Lewis & Clark College, a master's degree in English education from CUNY Lehman College, and a master's in educational leadership studies from CUNY Baruch College. She lives in South Orange, New Jersey, where she serves as a member of the South Orange-Maplewood Board of Education, with her husband and two children.

Introduction

"We do not inherit the earth from our ancestors; we borrow it from our children."

—African Proverb

The past three years brought us all to a grinding halt as the Covid-19 health pandemic imposed a global quarantine in every corner of the world. While living under lockdown, many of us were forced to confront illness, grief, and job loss. At the same time, our entire nation, and world, witnessed the murder of George Floyd at the hands of a police officer, captured through the lens of a bystander's smartphone. This tragedy sparked a racial reckoning, a call for justice, and an affirmation that Black lives did indeed matter. Its repercussions spread through the country like an insatiable wildfire, as the truth of human injustice had been laid bare—at least for those of us willing to accept that reality.

Many Americans were reminded that across cultures and generations our existence has been undergirded by a belief in "a fixed and embedded ranking of human value that sets the presumed supremacy of one group against the presumed inferiority of other groups on the basis of ancestry and often immutable traits" (Wilkerson, 2020, p. 16). Such beliefs have long been upheld as the rationale for dehumanization of Black Americans. Our collective eyes, in the face of mass deaths and fragile mortality, were challenged in ways that provoked a reckoning of our consciousness. In the days and weeks following Floyd's murder, massive peaceful protests erupted across the country demanding justice,

most urgently through substantial police reform. Industries and sectors across the country began grappling with the urgent inequities in their own respective houses. Corporate CEOs made commitments to “listen and learn” and assemble task forces to increase diversity in hiring practices and organizational and workplace cultures. Major retailers such as Ann Taylor and Gap flooded our emails with “We Stand With George” and “Black Lives Matter” subject headings.

Much in the way that previous protest movements gradually lost momentum, the protests that commenced during the summer of 2020 gradually subsided while the Covid-19 pandemic raged on. Summer turned to fall, and for educators, our focus turned to school reopening, remote instruction, and access to technology. However, the pandemic also revealed and exacerbated long-standing educational inequities and, more specifically, racial disparities, in an unprecedented manner.

Using assessment data from the fall of 2020, the McKinsey Group showed that students of color were, on average, three to five months behind where we would expect them to be in mathematics, while White students were only one month behind. While conditions showed slight improvement in the spring of 2021, largely as a result of the release of vaccines, Black and Brown students continued to “be more likely to remain remote and less likely to have access to the prerequisites of learning—devices, internet access and live contact with teachers” (Dorn et al., 2020, para. 4). The potential for multigenerational impact of this moment was highlighted in examples like the New York State report on the ripple effects of the pandemic on children. The report illustrated the severe consequences of economic insecurity on families with children under 18 years of age. Findings from the study indicated that without a high level of resources and focused interventions, over 300,000 children, particularly those of color, could suffer long-term impact from child poverty, including mental health, disruption of education, and their overall well-being (Brundage & Ramos-Callan, 2020).

These reports, and many others across the country, continued to present grim realities for students, especially those in vulnerable communities that are Black, Brown, and Indigenous. The conditions forced many school systems to evaluate their efforts, both pre-pandemic and in preparation for reopening, as well as to address long-standing racial

disparities. The twin pandemics, both racial and viral, of 2020 and 2021 brought us to a call-to-action: address deeply rooted issues of equity *now* in all aspects of education.

The mass response to this call to action was palpable. Many believed that this was our generation's turning point of recasting this moment into a more just, humane planet and country. It was our moment to seize the wrongs of centuries and bend the arc toward a history that finally lived up to the better of our angels and humanity. We were finally fully justified to address inequities that have plagued us socially and across our schools and classrooms. Whether by will or pressure from the moment's uncertainties and cries for being on the right side of humanity, reflections from school districts resulted in countless public declarations in service of creating more equitable systems for students in the wake of health, educational, and racial pandemics unfolding in our country. And as a tendency of education, the saturation of equity-focused initiatives began to flood social media, websites, and emails.

However, the pandemic also allowed for substantive opportunities for critical examination of existing practices that could result in more equitable learning experiences and outcomes. One facet of education that was long overdue for some reconsideration had been grading policies. Thousands of school districts, in the midst of the massive shift to remote learning, began to question the purpose of grading policies set for students' course requirements, graduation, and more importantly, assessing learning. Similarly, the traditional criteria for college applications were also upended by this pandemic. This led to colleges making decisions to remove SAT/ACT tests from their list of requirements and shifting the weight of testing as a primary indicator for the admissions process—a long-standing practice that not only failed to reveal students' academic potential but disproportionately penalized students of color. Another area that districts wrestled with was understanding how curricula requirements prioritize certain values over others. In particular, how do districts address the issues of race, power, and oppression that mirror many of our students' and communities' lived experiences? California, in mandating ethnic studies courses, provides a great example of how a district or entire state can call upon its students to positively impact our world by learning the stories of members of diverse ethnicities and cultures who

contributed to the history of this nation—particularly those groups that have been erased from so many mainstream history curricula.

Some state agencies, school districts, and communities began moving toward sustainable strategies to disrupt inequitable policies and practices such as disciplinary actions and access to curriculum. Others sought to build the collective consciousness of educators by sensitizing them to their implicit biases and beliefs that stand in the way of forming positive relationships with students of color. But as with so many promising “openings” in history, this moment was quickly met with a new, albeit predictable, barrier: an assault on the truth that, most recently, has taken the form of intense backlash against “critical race theory” in K–12 education.

For those readers who are unfamiliar with critical race theory (CRT), take comfort in knowing that you are not alone, especially since critical race theory is not (and never was) taught in public schools, contrary to the opinions of right-wing state legislators, pundits, and their followers who have led the attack. Rather, it is a body of scholarship that emerged from legal studies and explores the way that race functions in our institutions, systems, and policies. But facts don’t necessarily matter in the court of this particular public opinion. Like so many other surreal manifestations of our post-truth era, in a matter of just a few short months, the leaders of the backlash convinced a large swath of the country that K–12 educators were hell-bent on brainwashing students into believing that all White people are bad and racist and that America was evil. By the summer of 2021, ten states had passed anti-CRT legislation, with another 20 states in line to pass similar policies. Ironically, and importantly, almost none of these laws even mention critical race theory. Instead, these pieces of legislation ban “the discussion, training, and/or orientation that the U.S. is inherently racist as well as any discussions about conscious and unconscious bias, privilege, discrimination, and oppression. These parameters also extend beyond race to include gender lectures and discussions” (Ray & Gibbons, 2021, para. 5). In many cases, some of these bans include anti-social-emotional learning–related curricula and content. This backlash in the face of real progress is intended to tie the hands of districts and schools as they try, and fail, and try again to address long-standing and complex racial inequities. In short, the perpetrators of the backlash are attempting to set the course for a disruptive, often fear-induced,

approach to doing the work of our generation. This is not new to our human experience nor this country's shadowy existence.

From Hopeful Moments to Dreams Deferred

We've been at this crossroads before—countless times, in fact. Those of us who dare to believe that our world can be just and equitable have learned to recognize and understand these cycles of dysfunction. In fact, success in our pursuit of justice and equity relies on our ability to consolidate lessons from our history and ancestors that have taught us how to collectively and historically respond to our most urgent calls for educational equity, together!

There are many examples and guideposts in the history and evolution of this country's search for its soul. We can reflect on how the postslavery 19th century Reconstruction Era provides a glimpse into the narrative arc for the challenges we face in this moment. Historian Clarence Walker describes efforts of African Americans mobilizing for the education of their children as a “revolutionary act” on the part of newly freed slaves who saw the potential of education as a means toward obtaining the rights owed them as American citizens. “They understood that slavery had deprived them of a number of the tools that marked you as an American citizen; and that it was necessary, if they were to take their place as free people within the Union, that they have the rudiments and more than the rudiments of education to survive” (American Archive of Public Broadcasting, n.d.). In the decade to follow, Blacks and Whites moved through society in mostly integrated spaces. The subsidies set aside for the Freedmen's Bureau allowed for the development of schools for newly freed African Americans. And as progress grew, so did the resistance to this newfound freedom from many Whites across the country and in Southern states in particular. When President Andrew Johnson openly criticized the Bureau's efforts, the brief period of peaceful progress quickly gave way to racial violence in the South and apathy in the North. As Whites morphed the Democratic party into a staunch defender of White supremacy, terrorist organizations like the Ku Klux Klan used threats and violence to impede Black progress. By the time Reconstruction ended in the late 1870s, the Democratic Party had regained all control of the South. And as *Plessy vs. Ferguson* cemented legal segregation and ushered in the era of Jim Crow laws, the legacy of segregation became more and more entrenched.

Then again in the mid-20th century, we see yet another period of hopefulness as the landmark ruling of *Brown vs. Board of Education* in 1954 declared school-based racial segregation as unconstitutional. But the backlash that ensued from this monumental decision ensured that, in most cases, the status quo was maintained. When federal authorities began enforcing the law of the land late into the 1950s and early 1960s, many White communities took matters into their own hands. Scholars estimate that, across the nation, at least half a million White students were withdrawn from public schools between 1964 and 1975 to avoid mandatory desegregation.

Still, more than four decades after these segregation academies were established, the legacy of their efforts persists. A report from *Atlantic* magazine on the legacy of *Brown v. Board* found that

public schools are nearly as segregated as they were in the late 1960s . . . in many areas, they are rapidly resegregating as federal desegregation orders end. White families continue to flee schools following large influxes of poor or minority students. And in Indianola, as in the rest of the country, there's stark disagreement as to why: Whites often cite concerns over school quality, while [B]lacks are more likely to cite the persistence of racism. (Carr, 2012, para. 8)

The latter half of the 20th century saw a move away from integration efforts as a strategy to address systemic educational inequalities. Instead, we experienced the doubling down of federal mandates, from Reagan's "A Nation at Risk" to Bush's "No Child Left Behind"; standardized testing as a measure to standardize a quality education; and the birth of ubiquitous terms like "at-risk" to describe students (mostly Black and Brown) and "failing" to describe schools (mostly those that serve Black and Brown students). These efforts ushered us into the age of the "achievement gap" which led to pervasive beliefs that the wide disparity in student outcomes was somehow a result of inherent deficits in certain groups of students, particularly Black and Brown students, who consistently performed below their White and Asian counterparts, typically based on a single data point: the results of end-of-year "high-stakes" assessments. The "remedy" to what was commonly framed as deficits was watered-down, remedial

instruction, which in many cases, led to even more nefarious inequity actions through academic segregation. We saw the rise of hyper-leveling as a tool to address academic performance disparities, which resulted in a cementing of tracking as a tool to ensure certain students have access to accelerated learning opportunities like gifted and talented, AP, and honors courses.

Neutrality Is Not an Option for Transformational Leaders

Yes, we've been here before, and the shape has and continues to shift to reflect the depth and permanence of racial injustice in the American bone marrow. How often have we seen the most ardent proponents of justice become groups paralyzed with fear, the kind that breaks the psyche? For many equity leaders, these fears permeate their everyday lives, as they risk being targeted, marginalized, or losing livelihoods, all in the fight to do right by underserved communities, primarily Black, Brown, and Indigenous.

In the height of another pandemic—the AIDS pandemic—a group of activists chanted a rallying cry that was also a stern warning: “Silence = Death.” Much in the same way, we have learned that silence and inaction in the face of injustice can kill the purest and most righteous of movements. We are at a time of our human history in which we are confronted with many existential questions, beginning with this: *What is our purpose as human beings?* What happens when we extend such a question to our current roles? In our work as educational equity leaders, we have heard a consistent call from our colleagues that is a variation of such a question: *How do I **lead** this equity work in the way I'm being asked?* This question is often followed by another slightly focused on self-preservation: *How do I maintain a level of neutrality while doing work for educational justice?* At this point, we are forced to face an uncomfortable truth: Equity work, by its very nature, cannot be enacted while maintaining a neutral stance. At the same time, we don't advocate waving flags or shouting through a megaphone that you are an equity warrior. In fact, we find that such actions often counter progress. However, it is imperative to maintain a consistent focus—swiftness and unapologetic precise focus on creating equitable outcomes and experiences that match the challenge of the moment we're in.

The stakes could not be higher. We cannot afford to wait, stay neutral, be silent, or go through the motions of leading ineffective, ambiguous, or merely performative equity work alone. We risk producing another generation of young people who will grow into adulthood unwilling or unable to talk about race, of generations of young people not understanding the truth of our history or how that history shapes everything about their daily lives in continuing cycles of progress for some and backlash and deprivation for others. We risk perpetuating oppression, dehumanization, and most importantly, we risk the depletion and extinguishing of a generation's soul.

We're at another turn of human reckoning that each generation before us had to resolve for themselves: to choose to show up in service of advancing our collective humanity. And so, we must move through. We must be willing to sustain the discomfort and disequilibrium that comes with engaging adaptive challenges that have no easy or quick answers. We must be willing and able to take the long view from 30,000 feet and the ground view from 5 feet simultaneously and remain committed to the work of our lifetime—even when confronted by backlash.

We must also acknowledge the power of collectivity and that the risk of staying in silos also serves as a function of White supremacy. Our counternarrative to working in silos is recognizing and leveraging our interdependence at the racial, strategic, and human level countermove. Collaboration in the interest of enacting a common vision of equitable schools fuels and sustains the ability to create a more just world. Achieving this vision also calls upon us to identify and dismantle tools that maintain the status quo, even when they are masked as something else. And accepting that when real progress is made, through intentional, systemic changes in policy, structure, and people—whether through efforts to provide greater access to advanced coursework, to revise curriculum so that it is more culturally responsive, or to build the collective capacity of educators and communities to unpack bias and its impact on teaching and learning—the backlash will be waiting. We must understand, lift up, learn from, and implement historical lessons from *radical leaders* of the past and carefully study the blueprints they left for us to take on the work of our lifetime. Transformational leadership is what this moment requires—leadership that is rooted in deep knowledge, innovation, and change undergirded by understanding that advancement is achieved from the inside out. Understanding that our human progress

is integrally tied to reseeing how we work with others—people we may have never encountered before or, in some cases, even like to work with.

Whether you're a new leader assuming greater responsibilities or are seasoned in your practice, at this point in your leadership journey the moment's ask for our generation is enormous: Take actions that disrupt oppressive systems denying excellence to Black and Brown children. But what if your current go-to leadership moves and thoughts are the very things standing in the way of real change? What if the challenge requires focus on not just performance but on harnessing the courageous efforts of self and others, in an unyielding push for being, doing, and showing up with fortitude? What if our current challenge relies on leaders who understand how to leverage deep knowledge, will, empathy, resilience, and understanding collective strength, capacity, and heightened consciousness to lead through adaptive challenges that contribute substantially to better outcomes for marginalized children and communities—our humanity?

And this is where we extend a sound invitation for our colleagues—you—to lean in and journey with us.

As former school leaders, coaches, and system-level leaders, outside and in the nation's largest school district, we have wrestled firsthand with navigating the thrill that comes from thinking we know the answers, having tried-and-true strategies that, much like the teacher who dusts off the beloved unit or lesson plans, lead us to predictable outcomes. We have lived leadership on the “path of least mess” because it's easiest in resolution, provides consistent closure, and quite frankly, there's no time or no one pausing long enough to explore a different possibility forward toward innovation and transformation. We have been leaders stuck in a recycled frame that does not serve to actualize sustainable outcomes for our students, communities, and the larger world. Like many of our colleagues, we, too, have been stuck in stagnation. We don't claim to have the quick fix or checklist, perfect recipe, or magical fairy dust ordaining you an equity leader or warrior.

On the contrary, our collective experience of over 40 years has taught us one thing: Leadership is messy, dynamic with challenges that can often feel like navigating a minefield. The higher we climb, the more we internalize exactly what we must do to ensure a “successful” outcome. Yet our

tried-and-true moves have another side to them and can just as easily become our defaults. While these defaults (security blanket strategies) ensure some semblance of control over process and outcome, they also lead to a cycle of surface, technical achievements that fall short of the transformation impact we hope to achieve. Again, we don't claim to have *the* answer to the questions; however, we have culled our combined 40 years of experience in leadership, change management, strategy, coaching, and policy design to share our successes, failures, and cautionary tales learned in many roles and educational settings, including helping to design and lead the largest equity agenda ever in the nation's largest school district.

We've learned that disrupting systems that fail Black and Brown children requires school and systems leaders who are increasingly hungry to cultivate consciousness through disciplined study of the history and impact of race and education in this country. At the same time, much of what stops leaders from stepping into their full potential as *equity* leaders is a false belief that, without a complete and total understanding of the very thing we just mentioned, they have no place *leading* the work. We acknowledge the importance of racial equity content, especially having a social–historical context of race in education. We also place equal importance on understanding the power of adaptive leadership development, collective problem-solving, and whole body healing. We offer a conceptual framework that, with synthesis and implementation of five key pillars of practice—self mastery, adaptive leadership, racial literacy, emergence, and healing activation—supports leaders in developing the critical tools necessary to push boundaries, transform policies and systems, and develop human capacity that impacts outcomes for students in meaningful and lasting ways. Each one of these pillars on its own helps to address aspects of complex problems riddled with historical factors that constantly shift to mirror the moment in time. The pillars enable leaders to create conditions that serve as antidotes to race neutrality, mediocrity, and technical unexamined responses.

Through our individual and collective stories, scenarios, and case studies, we offer hard-learned insights and strategies to overcome spiraling into stagnation and avoid cycles of dysfunctional equity work. Our strategies are offered as an “inside-out” approach—or, as we often refer to it as a borrowed term of “mirror-window” work. We share our own

personal journey of discovering ourselves in the work and describe the impacts that only occur once a leader begins to truly see themselves as a central focus of the work. Through these experiences, we will weave an ongoing thread that illustrates the false markers of success or arrival—these shape-shifter moments intended to make you think you have arrived—when, in reality, the gains are thin or token at best, ensuring the systems’ return to status quo in no time. Understanding the predictable pattern of these false markers is essential to predicting potential outcomes and targeting strategy for desired impact. And the more you invest in understanding and healing yourself, in building muscle to stand centered in the disequilibrium, the more equipped you are to navigate these patterns, serving to clear paths for generations to follow who will have fewer traumas to heal as they chart their own path in advancing efforts of social justice. Through intentional braiding of these pillars, systems, and individuals can be disrupted and reoriented in precise service to transformational equity. Without focus and equal attention to these pillars in a leader’s and systems development, we believe change will continue to succumb to long historical and predictable patterns of failure like most equity work.

Our work together unfolds in chapters as follows:

1. **Introduction**—We frame our premise for why *this* book and particularly *now* for bold and transformative leadership, and we establish our pillars as part of our invitation to address current dilemmas in leading for racial equity.
2. **Pillar One: The Journey to Self-Mastery**—We share our paths to education and our process for discovering an inside-out approach through our leadership stories—stories that on the surface couldn’t be more different but became connected in service of excellence.
3. **Pillar Two: Adaptive Leadership**—We explore the core principles of adaptive leadership, especially building the tolerance for discomfort that replaces the allure of technical quick fixes, often ever-present in checklist equity efforts. We introduce our learning about the inside-out approach as a precondition necessary for leading complex change with a racially conscious lens.

4. ***Pillar Three: The Training Chase: Pitfalls and Possibilities of Equity Work***—We focus on the important, but often overemphasized, pursuit of acquiring racial equity training. Our lens and schema inform how we interpret everything in education, from policy to quantitative data to conversations with students or families. Understanding what informs our unique schema, especially when rooted in an inside-out approach to unpacking the impact of race on our lives, builds the necessary lens to resee what has always been right in front of us with the goal of removing and replacing biased beliefs with ones that are culturally competent.
5. ***Pillar Four: Emergence: Focusing on the Power of the Collective***—In education, all too often, the crisis of the day drives the pace and the scale of strategy. This pattern often leads to a never-ending cycle of urgency over competency at the expense of collective impact and sustainability. Since the onset of public education, a “divide and conquer” approach has been the dominant way of being—from discrete subject areas to siloed divisions in policymaking. Understanding causes and relationships between elements contributing to problems and those poised to ensure most effective solutions provides greater clarity for sustainable outcomes. Emergence offers us an important lesson in the way complex strategy arises out of small, meaningful spaces of incubation and from stakeholders often indigenous to the issues. This is a necessary frame for disrupting the long-standing tenant of White culture, which often breeds silos and rewards competition. We offer important lessons for how we collectively create change.
6. ***Pillar Five: Mastering Healing for a Better Humanity***—Although we come to the work through the intellectual space, our very DNA arrives, in many cases, with generations of harm and unhealed trauma. An effective racial equity leader requires a disciplined approach to healing as a source of sustainability. Driving the distance of the work from generation to generation relies on a relentless pursuit of healing and wholeness in the




deepest way. We focus on the impact of somatic, mind-body-soul/ spirit awareness on personal and professional levels.

7. ***Epilogue: The Only Way Through Is Through***—We share our final thoughts about what is and has been possible in this work when there's a shared purpose and mission, even when the path forward is murky, tough, and unclear.

We explore these essential pillars for transformation and how each plays out for the self (for the leader) and for the collective (for the team/other stakeholders) through our own lived experiences as well as through vignettes from leader-colleagues across the country.

Contained within these chapters are additional resources and reflections for individual learning experiences. Each chapter concludes with key considerations to guide you along your journey. These salient learnings come from our collective almost half a century's worth of learning, both successes and failures that have defined our understanding of what is necessary to advance issues of equity in real and lasting ways. We have also offered intentional opportunities to deepen your learning at the end of each pillar through Extended Learning exercises. The Independent Practice section is filled with reflection exercises to help you assess your own understanding and engage in opportunities to deepen your own personal learning around the chapter's content. In the Collaborative Practice section, we offer you case studies that lift up key problems of practice aligned to the chapter's pillar. Our case studies are powerful invitations to extend the learning into critical dialogue with partners and colleagues in the work. We encourage you to use the experiences within the case studies to provoke curiosity and self-reflection and, most importantly, conversation. Each case study comes with a set of aligned reflection questions to spark, but not limit, your discussion. Please note that Pillars One and Five do not come with additional stand-alone case studies, as we offer our own lived experiences within these two chapters as a source of learning and reflection. It is our hope that these conversations, both with yourself and with others, will inspire reflection, learning, deeper questions, and, ultimately, a shift in action.

Icons Used in This Book

SECTION	ADINKRA SYMBOL	SYMBOL NAME	SYMBOL MEANING
Core Considerations		Nea onnim no sua a ohu	"Who does not know can know from learning" Knowledge, Education
Independent Practice		Akoma ntoso	"Linked hearts" Understanding
Collaborative Practice		Ese ne tekrema	"The teeth and the tongue" Friendship, Interdependence

Icon source: [iStock.com/iSidhe](https://www.istock.com/iSidhe)