

## CHAPTER 1

# Social Justice

## *A Framework for Equity in Public Education*

*If we are genuinely serious about embracing social justice, we must transform our thinking. Social justice is not a condiment that is added to a sandwich or dressing that is placed over a salad. It is not something that gives flavor to our work after it's complete, but it is the work itself. Social justice is an essential ingredient that is baked into the process of whatever we are preparing for children.*

Of all my professional roles, I am most proud to be a school psychologist. More than anything else, my experiences as a practitioner inform my graduate teaching, consulting, speaking, and writing. Having served real children and families who attend real schools in real communities has given me tremendous insight into the stubborn inequities that plague public education. But as I detail throughout this book, inequity is a result—it's a by-product, an outcome, of what we (educators, school systems) have or have not done, even unintentionally, for children.

In *How to Be an Antiracist*, Ibram X. Kendi provides a succinct definition, a non-definition, and concrete examples of racial equity and racial inequity. First, the non-definition: “racial inequity is when two or more racial groups are not standing on approximately equal footing” (Kendi, 2019, p. 18). As an example, in 2014, the number of individuals (by race) who were living in owner-occupied homes was 71% for White families, 45% for Latinx<sup>1</sup> families, and 41% for Black families. These disparate outcomes show that White families were almost twice as likely as Black families to own their homes. On

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<sup>1</sup>Although it is an imperfect term, throughout this book, *Latinx* is used to refer to Hispanic individuals.

the other hand, the definition: “racial equity is when two or more racial groups are standing on relatively equal footing” (Kendi, 2019, p. 18). Using the same home ownership example, there should be relatively similar numbers of families across racial groups living in their own homes. In schools, inequity is often referred to as **disproportionality**—the extent to which a certain group is represented in a category (e.g., Black students receiving suspensions or expulsions; English learners [ELs] who are identified with a specific learning disability [SLD]; Latinx students who are eligible for the gifted program) and differs from an agreed-upon benchmark (e.g., White (or all other) students receiving suspensions or expulsions; White (or all other) students who are identified with SLD; White (or all other) students who are eligible for the gifted program). For many schools and school districts, disproportionate outcomes exist in at least one area (e.g., special education eligibility, suspension/expulsion [discipline], gifted identification). But as Kendi implied in his example above, an individual’s race/ethnicity should not predict their likelihood of owning a home. Similarly, students’ race/ethnicity, family socioeconomic status (SES), English proficiency, or any other demographic characteristic should not predict outcomes in the previously mentioned categories. When inequities (disproportionality) exist in schools, educators must investigate the factors (reasons) that contribute to such outcomes. More than an outcome, disproportionality is an opportunity to interrogate the policies and practices that lead to some students remaining in the margins of a high-quality education system while their peers excel.

Without oversimplifying or reducing social justice to a checklist of practices or begrudgingly viewing it as yet another thing to do, the primary answer to *Why am I writing this book?*<sup>2</sup> is to give all educators—PreK–12 teachers, building administrators (e.g., assistant principals and principals), central office leaders (e.g., superintendents, assistant superintendents, special education directors, student services directors, chief equity officers), and mental health providers (e.g., school counselors, school psychologists, and school social workers)—a framework for how to think about social justice in schools and practical suggestions for embedding socially just practices into their day-to-day roles and responsibilities. In speaking to teachers, administrators, and policymakers about how socially just practices lead to equitable outcomes, they ultimately want to know three things: First, what is social justice? Second, why is it important for my respective role? Third, how do I engage in socially just practices to increase equitable outcomes for students, families, schools, and communities? These questions are answered throughout this book.

## **ABOUT THIS BOOK**

### ***Who Should Read This Book?***

Everyone who cares about children. One of the biggest truths about social justice is that it is fundamentally about how systems and structures differentially affect people based on their intersecting identities. As a result, social justice requires everyone’s commitment

to shift the ways that unjust practices lead to negative outcomes for children. Whether you're a general education, special education, or EL teacher, *Social Justice in Schools* provides insight and helpful perspectives to better understand your students and families. For school-based mental health providers, this book explores how significant contextual factors (events happening around students) affect children's social, emotional, and behavioral functioning. For principals and central office administrators, it highlights the critical role of policy in promoting positive outcomes for children. Whether you're new to the profession or a veteran educator, this book will reinforce truths that you've known for a long time, give you language to navigate challenging situations, or demystify what social justice is and how it's relevant to equity in public education.

### **What Is This Book Trying to Convey?**

We often teach children to look for the *main idea*. What is the main idea of *Social Justice in Schools*? The purpose of this text is to show as concretely as possible how educators can actively work toward promoting (increasing) equitable outcomes for all students. Additionally, the book challenges educators to think broadly about the world in which they (and their students) live and the contributing factors to children's difficulties. Over the course of eight chapters, readers are invited to critique their personal philosophical orientation to serving students and encouraged to commit themselves to ongoing professional learning to ultimately become more responsive to their students and families.

### **When Should I Read This Book?**

Best described as a guide for practitioners, *Social Justice in Schools* is well suited for lifelong learners in their various roles as educators. Whether you read this book before each school year or assign it to your teachers, staff, departments, or professional learning communities as a shared book study, reading and rereading about these principles and concepts throughout your career will be time well spent. For graduate students, this book may be a required or recommended text or a resource to support your studies.

### **Where Does This Book Fit into My Professional Practice?**

This is perhaps the easiest question to answer: This book belongs at the center of your (our) professional practice. Consider the following statement: *If we are genuinely serious about embracing social justice, we must transform our thinking. Social justice is not a condiment that is added to a sandwich or dressing that is placed over a salad. It is not something that gives flavor to our work after it's complete, but it is the work itself. Social justice is an essential ingredient that is baked into the process of whatever we are preparing for children.* So, rather than viewing social justice as separate from our teaching, our

leadership, our counseling, our assessment, or our policymaking, because social justice is the work itself, it needs to be infused into all of these activities.

### ***How Will This Book Help Me in My Academic Journey or Professional Practice?***

When reading portions of this book, you might be encouraged because your practice is consistent with social justice. At other times, you will be challenged to revisit and revise your approach so that you can more effectively promote positive outcomes for children. Whatever it is for you on any given day, remember: It's OK as long as you're committed to making the necessary changes (i.e., challenging yourself and systems) that are in the best interest of children.

## **FEATURES OF SOCIAL JUSTICE IN SCHOOLS**

### ***What Can I Expect While Reading This Book?***

To facilitate an engaging, interactive, and effective learning experience, the following text features have been included in each of the chapters. First, key vocabulary and their definitions are in **boldface type**. These terms are some of the most essential concepts to help you understand each chapter's content. If you are previewing the chapters, making a list of the key terms can be an effective strategy to expose yourself, your students, or your colleagues to the major points that will be covered in more detail.

To emphasize the active role that educators play in promoting social justice, Chapters 2 through 7 are titled using the following phrase: "Social Justice Is About. . . ." Next, and taken from Barrett (2018), a challenge statement highlights the content of the chapter. Further, learning outcomes are included to frame readers' expectations. Whether you use *Social Justice in Schools* in graduate courses or as a book study in professional learning communities, these objectives can be helpful for structuring lessons or small-group discussions about each chapter.

For school psychologists, not only does the book support the most recently adopted strategic goal (social justice) of the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP; 2017), but it is also aligned with the NASP Model for Comprehensive and Integrated School Psychological Services (Practice Model; NASP, 2020). But irrespective of discipline, *Social Justice in Schools* highlights the importance of all educators using data to inform decisions; consulting and collaborating with families, schools, and communities; implementing schoolwide practices to promote learning and safe and supportive environments; and providing evidence-based academic interventions, instructional supports, and mental and behavioral health services. As many professions and their respective associations have been more explicit about their commitment to social justice, *Social*

*Justice in Schools* shows how educators can embrace and embed these principles into all aspects of their professional practice.

Because some of the concepts can seem abstract, vignettes, scenarios, and case examples are included throughout the book to illustrate key principles. Though some of these examples are taken from real life, identifying information has been changed to protect the anonymity of students, families, schools, communities, and professionals. To be inclusive of all readers, particularly those who are nonbinary or whose gender identity is neither masculine nor feminine, *they/them/their* pronouns are used when referring to a single individual.

Last, *Discussion Questions* and *Resources for Professional Learning* have been included at the end of most chapters to inspire personal reflection, small-group discussion, and further learning. Given the nature of the content, it is important that readers allow themselves time to process the information, sometimes wrestle with their discomfort, and record their reactions while learning to think in new ways. This is an essential aspect of learning that is often overlooked, especially for adult students. The *Resources for Professional Learning* section includes books, articles, websites, and activities (e.g., links to lesson plans) that can reinforce key ideas previously presented in the chapter and be helpful to individuals, classes, schools, or small-group professional learning communities. In sum, the Questions and Resources are designed to facilitate active engagement with the material rather than passively receiving information.

## **SOCIAL JUSTICE IN SCHOOLS: A BRIEF OVERVIEW**

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In Chapter 2, readers are introduced to ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1977) and the importance of developing a comprehensive understanding of students to make the most appropriate educational decisions. The chapter discusses how social justice is fundamentally about systems and structures leading to differential outcomes for students, families, schools, and communities.

Chapter 3 focuses on the importance of educators challenging themselves and their colleagues when their actions are inconsistent with social justice or socially just practices. Two real-world examples are provided that include sample language for responding to colleagues when their behavior is unintentionally harmful to students, and several principles are highlighted to show why the responses are necessary through the lens of social justice. School-based policies and practices that need to be disrupted and dismantled because they are not aligned with social justice and because they reinforce educational inequities are also reviewed. Last, the chapter addresses terms that are commonly used in psychology and education, including reframing language to be more consistent with social justice.

To encourage self-reflection, Chapter 4 focuses on the importance of educators understanding three foundational constructs—privilege, implicit bias, and intersectionality—and their relationship to inequities in public education. Though not always comfortable to discuss, these concepts are essential to developing a social justice paradigm that ultimately leads to equitable outcomes. Because the concepts can be relatively complex, vignettes and personal reflections are used to clearly articulate and illustrate them.

Chapter 5 discusses using a multimethod and multi-informant assessment approach to more accurately understand students' performance. References to assessing children's cognitive abilities, academic achievement, and social, emotional, and behavioral functioning highlight the importance of considering contextual factors (e.g., limited English proficiency, race/ethnicity, rater characteristics) that can influence their performance on traditional (standardized) instruments with implications for special education (e.g., SLD, other health impairment) and gifted eligibility. Lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic are highlighted to show how educators can think broadly (systemically) and creatively about meeting the needs of their students.

Chapter 6 focuses on educators developing a deep understanding of the students, families, and communities they serve. Using contemporary history (the polarizing 2016 presidential election, the highly publicized murders of several African Americans throughout 2020) and an interdisciplinary example from a pediatrician who studies the relationship between police violence, equity, and child health outcomes, the chapter shows how children's behavioral symptoms can be functionally related to, and sometimes better explained by, events that are happening around them (e.g., exposure to national crises or chronic community violence). Because the terms are frequently misunderstood, the chapter includes a brief discussion of what Black Lives Matter means in principle and the difference between making political statements on behalf of students and families and partisan alignment.

Because empowering families to be their children's most informed and effective advocates is central to social justice, Chapter 7 discusses the importance of educators intentionally creating school communities that are genuinely inclusive. Similar to Chapter 4, anecdotes are used to explain the differences between diversity, inclusion, and equity.

Chapter 8 provides a challenge to all educators. With an explicit focus on advocacy, policy, and systems change, the NASP Exposure Project—a multiyear, national initiative designed to address critical workforce shortages in school psychology and increase the number of racially and ethnically minoritized (REM)<sup>2</sup> individuals in the field—is highlighted as an effective strategy to promote diversity, which is necessary but not sufficient for inclusion or equity. Though the chapter cautions against looking for prescriptive

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<sup>2</sup>As is discussed in Chapter 3, this book intentionally uses systems-centered language. For example, except for direct quotations that used other terms, when referring to non-White individuals as a collective group, *racially and ethnically minoritized* (REM) is used rather than *minority* or *minorities*. For more information about using systems-centered language, please read Barrett (2021a).

(checklist) approaches to tackling educational inequities, it provides practical suggestions for how individuals can collaboratively advance systems change in schools and school districts.

Chapter 9, the most autobiographical section of the book, encourages readers to reflect upon their lived experiences and how they have shaped their professional identities. From recognizing significant events that have informed their perspectives and approaches to serving children, families, schools, and communities to tracing their growth and development as social justice–oriented educators, readers will be challenged to think about their core values and how they align with infusing socially just practices into their respective professional roles.

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