

Insights on (In)Equity Initiatives in the Context of Discourse, Organizations, and Identity

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Abstract: In today's educational settings, equity initiatives are simultaneously ubiquitous and highly contested. Struggles to achieve meaningful social change through these initiatives are often studied as *public policy* or *leadership* crises, yet could and should be addressed anew as a matter of *learning* that is mediated by practitioners' socio-political *identities in organizational contexts*. This symposium takes up this challenge, exploring how organizational settings mediate practitioner learning and activity to determine the relationship between macro-level equity discourses and micro-level socio-political identity. We build on theoretical and empirical work across organizational learning, educational equity, and identity. Across these papers we explore the relationship between identity and equity work in four distinct organizational contexts: 1) a faculty learning community within a research university, 2) science museums, 3) two education grantmaking organizations, and 4) an out-of-school time STEM education provider.

Presently, many educational institutions--elementary and secondary schools; universities and colleges; museums, zoos and aquaria; after-school and out-of-school-time organizations--have been charged with increasing the diversity of, and creating equitable conditions for, both their workforce and their learners. This social and political directive is in response to the growing ethnic, racial, cultural, and linguistic diversity of learners in the United States and the racially homogenous nature of education practitioners and leaders, most of whom are white (Berry, 2015; Gay, 2013; Collaboration for Ongoing Visitor Experiences Studies, 2018). This agenda is also motivated by the increasing attention paid to redressing the socio-economic disadvantage inherited by communities of color as a result of historical injustices and structural racism (e.g., slavery, Jim Crow, school resegregation). In an effort to respond to these pressures, educational institutions have leaned primarily on three key strategies: 1) recruitment and retention of minoritized learners, workers or both (i.e., "diversity"); 2) instating "inclusive" organizational policies (i.e., "inclusion" or "inclusivity"); and 3) designing interventions for minoritized learners so that they provide access to domain- or setting-specific resources (i.e., "access") (Ahmed, 2012; Nightingale & Mahal, 2012). Yet these strategies have not resulted in a diversified workforce, nor have they led to equitable partnerships and interactions with minoritized learners or workers (Wentling, 2004; Kania & Kramer, 2011).

Notably, not all initiatives aimed at increasing diversity or equity do the same, or even similar, work. This can be partially attributed to differences in education practitioners' social locations in their organizations--meaning that the roles and positions they occupy, the departments in which they are situated, and the ways in which they interpret and enact their social identities in response to the situations in which they find themselves (Weick, 1995) all profoundly impact how practitioners' engage with diversity and equity work. This is also due in part to the multiple languages and meanings of "diversity" and "equity", which are constantly shifting, frequently conflated, and often contested. This ambiguity is consequential as we know that the definitions of diversity and equity that individuals and organizations adopt can have material impacts on ensuing educational designs as they are pulled from macro-level discourse down to the micro-level of practice (Hand, Penuel, & Gutiérrez, 2013; McCambly & Colyvas, Under Review). Paradoxically, we also know that an organization's adoption of particular equity discourses *does not always* result in meaningful changes in practitioners' pedagogy or processes of organizational learning (Spillane, 2000; Fiss & Zajac, 2006). Prior work offers some rationales for why organizational policies and discourses are often decoupled from practice including differences in: 1) how frames (i.e., global, socio-cultural, political discourses and narratives related to diversity and equity) are manifested and mobilized within organizations (e.g., Benford & Snow, 2000; Coburn, 2006); and 2) how individuals adopt, enact, or intentionally negate particular definitions for diversity and equity work in patterned ways correlated with their individual racial, class, and gender identities (Rattan & Ambady, 2013; Warikoo & Novais, 2015). Still, we know relatively little about the cognitive and cultural processes that happen in the context of specific organizations which act as structured mediators between macro- and micro-levels of activity (Ray,

2019). The failures of equity initiatives, which have often been studied as a *public policy* or *leadership* crisis, could and should be addressed anew as a matter of *learning* that is mediated by practitioners' socio-political identities in organizational contexts.

This symposium takes up this challenge, exploring how organizational settings mediate practitioner learning to determine the relationship between macro-level diversity and equity discourses and micro-level socio-political identity. We also attempt to address the explicit question of **how organizations learn**, which is undertheorized in the learning sciences. We build on theoretical and empirical work across organizational learning, educational equity, and identity--centering that "We neglect the extent to which all of us are more often agents of organizations, working to achieve not our own personal but organizational objectives..." (Scott, Reuf, Mendel & Caronna, 2000, p. 2). As such, we understand that opportunities to learn are often enabled or constrained by organizations' and individuals' efforts to preserve their own identities (Gagliardi, 1986). Therefore, our work explores how social norms and policies (normative frameworks, beliefs, rule systems) contribute to an uneven distribution of opportunities to teach and learn in educational institutions. We wish to bridge the macro with the micro, connecting the teaching and learning experiences of education practitioners within the social (institutional) structures that provide the context for those experiences (Esmonde & Booker, 2016). While the field of learning sciences offers a wealth of theoretical and empirical knowledge on the topic of how people learn, which include rich work demonstrating the influence of social context on (and the fundamentally cultural nature of) teaching and learning (e.g., Nasir, Rosebery, Warren, & Lee, 2006), the field provides limited conceptualizations or descriptive work of socio-organizational context.

Across these papers we explore the relationship between identity and diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) work in four distinct organizational contexts: 1) a faculty learning community within a research university, 2) science museums, 3) two education grantmaking organizations, and 4) an out-of-school-time STEM education provider. In all four contexts, education practitioners are negotiating one or more DEI initiative(s) in response to explicitly or implicitly stated diversity and educational equity problems. Additionally, across all four contexts, practitioners must make sense of DEI work from their own epistemological orientations and social positionalities. These commonalities allow us to draw parallels about the interaction of identity with adopted practices or forms of resistance across educational settings. Central to this project is our interest in taking up Esmonde and Booker's (2016) challenge to the discipline to directly attend to the intersections of macro-levels of power, micro-levels of individual cognition and cultural practice, and the meso-level contexts that link them in order to analytically "address the maintenance of normativity and the production of differential outcomes that affect learners and their networks of communities" (p. 163). We apply principles of sociocultural theories of learning to our varied contexts to analyze how organizational conditions mediate learning processes that occur as individuals respond to and enact DEI discourses. We also understand educational equity as centering learners' multiple repertoires of practice, situating learners' cultural identities as strengths and addressing learners' needs for inclusion and affirmation (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001; Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003; Nasir et al., 2006; Vossoughi, Escude, Kong, & Hooper, 2013). Accordingly, we view diversity and inclusion as insufficient if not combined with learning environments that make explicit use of pedagogical approaches that support and advance learners' cultural and intellectual histories.

Whose work is it?: Power and positionality in higher ed equity work

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Across the United States, postsecondary institutions are embracing an espoused commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) (Jayakumar, 2008). Generally, these efforts focus on compositional diversity, or the number of people of color within a given organizational context. Yet, research demonstrates that a shift in racial demographics does not necessarily lead to equity-oriented change in institutional logics (Slay, Reyes, & Posselt, 2019). Within activity systems, institutional actors simultaneously navigate being constrained by the normative processes of institutionalization and exerting agency to resist routine repertoires of practice (Scott, et al., 2000). This tension between constraint and empowerment is often informed by aspects of a person's social identities (e.g., race and gender), which intersect to bolster or threaten their social location within a given organizational context (Hernandez, 2018). In this way, the study of equity minded organizational learning and change in higher education must be conceptualized as a set of relational, nested, and co-constituted processes concerning the intersectional individual, their organizational context, and broader institutionalized structures and logics.

This paper highlights findings from a qualitative case study of Crit PD, a faculty intergroup dialogue (IGD) program at a midsize, R-1, midwestern white serving institution of higher education (WSI). IGD is a sociocultural approach to teaching and learning that leverages the role of language and identity in mediating collaborative meaning-making (Nagda & Gurin, 2007). By leveraging participants' identities and lived

experiences as key tools for learning and critical reflection, Crit PD sought to facilitate individual and institutional change by expanding faculty's capacity for critical consciousness around issues of race and gender. The curriculum begins with a two-day intensive critical reflection and dialogue session followed by monthly meetings throughout the academic year. Cohorts meet as whole groups, with an option to participate in affinity groups (one for white-identified people and one for people of color). While participants reported multiple positive outcomes, findings reveal a need for critical reflection around issues of positionality and power along with their implications for equity work.

I conducted semi-structured interviews with ten faculty alumni (three women of color, three white women, two men of color, and two white men) to better understand their perceptions of the efficacy of Crit PD, as well as whether and how they encounter support and/or barriers to implementing reported learning in their praxis as educators and administrators. I used critical constructivist grounded theory (Malagon, Huber, and Velez, 2009), which posits that theory is generated from the power-laden process of dynamic meaning-making between the researcher and their participants. This approach guided thematic coding of the data, iteratively giving way to salient patterns and tensions, to produce my findings.

A major theme emerged concerning issues of positionality and spheres of influence of the program. Participants expressed concern about who was (not) participating in Crit PD. In contrast to their programming for staff, Crit PD struggled to recruit faculty participants. Some participants believed this was connected to the program's position in the Women's Center. One participant said, "I think [Crit PD] belongs in the Provost's Office...if you had higher up buy-in, then you would get more faculty." Relatedly, participants mentioned a desire to recruit senior faculty and administrators who can influence policy and practice. In reference to the fact that most Crit PD participants are non-tenure line faculty (whom research reveals are limited in power and influence; see Kezar & Sam, 2013), one participant blatantly asked, "...why are people who can't make a difference in the institution going through all this diversity training instead of the top administrators who can actually make something happen?" As these findings show, positionality, as it relates to social location within an organizational context, matters deeply for if and how programs are legitimated and thereby produce change.

Additionally, individuals' subjectivities also mediated organizational learning, with faculty of color carrying the burden of facilitating learning and critical reflection for their white colleagues. Faculty of color routinely reported DEI initiative-fatigue. A participant remarked, "You're not compensated for [diversity work]...My annual review does not include it, but it should," indicating a perception that DEI work remains notoriously undervalued by the institution. Pertinently, participants reported that Crit PD's propensity to "preach to the choir" limited its effect on organizational learning and institutional change. One participant lamented, "the people who really needed to be there, they weren't there, and they were still committing the same crimes everyday." Higher education research continuously highlights racial and gender disparities in service and DEI work. However, as faculty of color highlight, equity is not "work," "it's our lives." Many participants expressed frustration that the university's commitment to DEI, even in Crit PD, generally fell short of action. Programs like Crit PD must be aware of the emotional and psychological toll that being a person of color charged with doing DEI work at a WSI often causes and actively creates mechanisms to not further this burden. Overall, this research highlights that in order to maximize opportunities to forward equity higher education, we must pay attention to how issues of identity and positionality affect the efficacy of individual and organizational learning.

When identities intersect: Navigating individual and organizational identity and learning in the context of diversity and equity work

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In this paper, I explore positionings of self and organization within the context of diversity and equity work taking place in informal learning organizations, specifically science museums. Centering a social-constructionist approach to language, I see positioning as a discursive process through which people produce and ascribe narratives about themselves, others and organizations as particular kinds of people and organizations with particular kinds of individual and organizational identities (van Langenhove & Harré, 1999; Gee, 2000). Importantly, ontological, epistemological, and axiological positionings of self, others and organizations in relation to knowing and knowledge are routine parts of social interaction (Lemke, 2002; Davies & Harré, 1990). As such, macro- and micro-interactive acts of positioning work to profoundly shape and structure learning, and access to learning, across educational contexts. This study is part of a larger project that investigates museum practitioners' beliefs and assumptions about diversity, diversity work, and diverse publics (read minoritized communities). This work has looked at practitioners' beliefs about the role learners' ethnic, cultural, and racial identities play in their sensemaking of museum experiences as well as the patterns of alignment and misalignment between practitioners'

espoused values and their actions. For the study herein, I use positioning theory as an analytic lens to make sense of how museum practitioners understand their organization's DEI work as well as their role in DEI interventions.

The data for this paper comes from interviews with 26 science museum practitioners from 14 organizations across 11 states. Practitioners worked in a variety of science museum settings located in major urban areas across the U.S. including natural history museums, museums of science and industry, nature and science museums, and science and technology centers. Practitioners also worked across the exhibition, education, science/research/collections, and audience research departments in a variety of positions including vice president/chief officer, scientist/curator, director, manager, exhibit developer, and coordinator. I analyzed the data generated from my interviews by open coding transcripts while using the constant comparative method, similar to a grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Glaser & Strauss, 2009) but informed by a theoretical framework that draws on literatures across positioning, organizational learning and sensemaking, identity, and educational equity (Weick, 1995; van Langenhove & Harré, 1999; Gee, 2000; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001; Nasir et al., 2006; Vossoughi et al., 2013). My analysis centered on the descriptive phrases, terms, and labels museum practitioners used to socially locate, or position, themselves and their organizations with respect to their understanding of, and role in, their museum's diversity and equity work. My examination of practitioners' words, descriptions, and discursive moves revealed multiple tensions between practitioners' conceptualizations of their individual identity and their perceptions of their museums' organizational identity in moving DEI programming and initiatives forward.

I focus this paper on four key findings: 1) practitioners' widely characterized themselves as having "progressive" or "liberal" identities in connection to DEI work, indicating that their ideological leanings are in stark contrast to their museum's "conservative" identity and their museum's disinclination for change; 2) relatedly, practitioners, including vice presidents and chief executive officers, largely attempted to identify themselves as socially and politically separate from their organizations, referring to their museums as "they," "the museum," and/or "the organization", implying that they (similar to those in positions without administrative "power" or leverage) are subject to their organization's proclivities around issues of diversity and equity; 3) practitioners' assumptions about their museums' organizational identity and stance around diversity tended to protect the status quo (e.g. "my museum values diversity only because of the potential it has to generate revenue" or "my museum values diversity because of representational optics"), which ostensibly precluded them from challenging their organizations, consequently leading to a silent assent of inequity; and 4) it was uncommon for practitioners to index their own social identities across the dimensions of race, ethnicity and culture (despite the context and content of the interview)—however, those who did engage in critical self-reflection of their own positionalities appeared to more deeply dwell on how identification with, and participation in, ethnic, cultural, and racial communities provide lenses for sense making. The latter is particularly notable as research has shown that critical engagement with identities, both others and their own, creates openings for practitioners to perspective-take in ways that deeply consider the worldviews and beliefs of others (Cochran-Smith, 2004).

Based on these findings, I explore how positionings of self and organization may open up and foreclose opportunities to learn, both at the organizational and individual level. I suggest ways museums and practitioners might reimagine how both organizational systems and pedagogical practices can be restructured to create the curiosity, will, time and commitment needed for reflective work around their co-constitutive identities. Further, I explore ways that museums and practitioners might surface how organizational- and individual-level factors hinder or advance their diversity and equity work. In doing this, the possibility exists that both museums and practitioners may develop new understandings of the strategies they need to dismantle conditions that constrain DEI work.

Backlash or breakthrough: Making and giving sense to race-conscious grantmaking

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In this study I examine practitioner learning about and adoption of DEI initiatives in the context of education grantmaking organizations. Given the active and politically charged role of private philanthropy in aiding or preventing race-conscious work in education, this domain is not only understudied but urgently relevant to DEI work in the larger education ecology (Quinn, Tompkins-Stange, & Meyerson, 2014). The goal of this study, which is part of a larger multi-method project on the development and effects of ideology in educational grantmaking, is to elaborate theory about the processes of sensemaking and organizational learning that occur around DEI topics in educational work.

I use two large grantmaking organizations—one private and one federal—as a comparative case study. At the time of data collection, both organizations had recently undergone a shift from a race-evasive to a race-

conscious strategy for catalyzing educational change. Both organizations invest solely in projects relevant to improving college learning and attainment in the U.S. The specific questions addressed in this paper are: From the perspective of a broad set of practitioners, how and for what espoused reason were changes in two organizations' racial frames initiated (RQ1)? How do practitioners report making sense of these changes in relation to their own identity (RQ2a)? What do practitioners report as relevant to grantmaking practice before vs. after a shift from race-evasive to race-conscious approaches (RQ2b)?

In the context of the organizational adoption of a race-conscious frame toward educational change, we can predict that actors with dominant identities, who make up the majority of grantmaking staff, are likely to feel threatened and resist frames that delegitimize the privileges of their "in-group," even to the point of increasing their racial bias (Rattan & Ambady, 2013). I analyze in this paper how contextual features of the organization structure sensemaking processes in ways that create (or not) an interest, even among groups whose identity will not be maximized by a race-conscious frame, to implement new models for action. In the sensemaking literature this is sometimes referred to as "sensegiving" or a behavior during strategic change in which stakeholders influence the sensemaking of others toward a preferred set of definitions (Maitlis & Christianson, 2017). Sensemaking processes in which stakeholders engage in sensegiving lead to more prolonged sequences of aligned actions and a richer, unified narrative for change. If symbolic changes result in material consequences, then some combination of sensemaking and aligned shifts in organizational routines have been effective in bridging higher- to lower-order change (Fiss & Zajac, 2006; Spillane et al., 2011). However, we have no empirical studies that speak to the structures that might be supportive to sensemaking and learning about race consciousness among practitioners with privileged identities and power over educational resources.

To answer these questions, I draw on a qualitative-comparative analysis using extensive interview (N=61 grantmaking staff) and archival data (N=252 documents) (Ragin & Amoroso, 2010). Because qualitative research typically examines issues from the perspective of the participant, it is appropriate, and therefore frequently used in the study of members' constructions and accounts of organizational life and change (e.g., Dutton & Dukerich, 1991; Gioia & Thomas, 1996). I recruited staff at all organizational levels as well as grantees to participate in interviews about their beliefs, organizational routines, and decision-making processes.

Both organizations adopted a similar macro-level frame and justifications for their strategic pivot toward race consciousness: "pursuing social justice," being responsive to "changing demographics," and maximizing "national welfare" by "promoting talent among minority populations." However, my previous studies demonstrate that these shifts, when studied quantitatively, resulted in significant but contradictory forms of change at the federal site, but transformative change at the private foundation. This study offers four novel insights about the organizational features that fomented backlash in one case and breakthrough in another. First, practitioners with significant attachments to a race-neutral view of their domain were at risk for seeing race-conscious initiatives as degrading to their work and likely to eschew recommended DEI practices. Second, *the path toward race-conscious change* was crucial to shaping practitioner sensemaking. At the federal site, the shift toward race consciousness came from outside the agency as a political directive. Whereas at the private foundation, the shift was internally generated as a result of group-learning processes. Third, initiative leaders' *commitment to sensegiving practices* had to be long-term, dialectical, and race-conscious such that both Practitioners of Color and White practitioners could *craft their professional identity relative to an anti-racist project*. And fourth, transformations aligned to race-conscious goals were centered in repetitive, embedded practices, e.g., routines mandating the use of new types of data, developing novel internal metrics, and creating sites for inquiry incorporating both bottom-up (program officers) and top-down (board) voices. Taken together, these insights provide principled guideposts for DEI initiatives co-constituted by both members *and* organizations' learning needs and sociopolitical identities.

When equity means everything and nothing at all: Framing equity in a coding camp for girls

Anna Bethune, Northwestern University

In this paper I look at an out-of-school time STEM education provider co-founded in early 2015 by three women that offers civics coding camps to high school girls. This organization, called BGBinc (anonymized to preserve confidentiality) teaches computer science, design-thinking, and leadership over the course of six days primarily to students from underserved and marginalized communities in the midwest. BGBinc has two major goals – 1) to help learners identify with coding, and 2) to engage learners in the socio-political reimagining of technology, its uses, and relevance to their communities. Many of the core team members were graduate students at a private university in the Midwest, and most, if not all, came from middle-class households. The co-founding team was comprised of two white American women, and one black immigrant woman. I focus on the co-founding team for

the purposes of this study. **I ask, how does an out-of-school time STEM education provider rationalize equity while attending to identity?** I make sense of the multiple ways actors have mobilized “equity” in the educational domain through framing. Frames are metacognitive meaning-making tools that foreground particular situations or activities and make rationales, interpretations, and orientations relevant to that activity (Benford & Snow, 2000).

I conducted a systematic review of archival data from BGBinc’s inception in April 2015 until February 2018. The data include formal legal documents — contracts with service providers, 501c3 forms — and informal notes from weekly executive meetings taken by the three co-founders to discuss general management. Field notes recording personal interactions captured off-the cuff discussion about fundraising, program expansion, and values. Documents, like grants, pitch decks and business proposals that reflected the ongoing deliberations around mission, value proposition and roles were also included. I placed analytic focus on mission development as this is an important non-profit management practice for new organizations (Druker, 2012).

The issue of identity came up only once in my analysis of external-facing organizational files. This absence speaks volumes. While BGBinc targets a minoritized community (girls), sub-groups within that community are not explicitly named. Their identities were never referenced in mission statements, grants, pitch decks, or marketing materials. BGBinc merely states that girls from underserved communities are targeted. However, the demographic breakdown of participants is shared in grants that explicitly request that information. Externally, BGBinc does not problematize or address the role that identity (i.e. racial/ethnic, religious, sexual, diasporic etc.) plays in STEM beyond acknowledging the gender gap in the STEM workforce between women (and women of color) and men. Internally, identity, its relevance to the organization and its place in the curriculum was a hotly contested issue. Identity activities were added to the BGBinc design-thinking curriculum in 2017 and modified several times over in the spirit of compromise. In other words, while identity was central to student engagement and curriculum development, externally, identity was not central to the story told to funders. To raise funds, it was enough to claim working with underserved populations. The NPO did not need to demonstrate that students’ multiple identities were respected, welcomed, and meaningfully engaged until one funder explicitly asked for that information.

I also found that co-founders grappled with multiple equity frames to remain relevant and solvent. At times, this negotiation reflected founders’ conflicting values and visions for what equity should mean and how it should be expressed. This was particularly evident when seeking funds from external parties. In this data corpus, the most common equity frames argued that: 1) diversity work was important for the social and economic welfare of minoritized groups and 2) minorities’ inclusion in the STEM community and workforce was a social justice issue. However, the equity frames that pushed for more radical forms of social justice through power redistribution were not reflected in the data. These equity frames included: 1) equity work that reveals the social and political implications of technology, 2) equity work that remedies past injustice experienced by minoritized communities, and 3) equity work embedded in social justice movement that reconfigure the relationship between STEM, power, and justice. The presence of language that focused on inclusion in the absence of language that advocates for the reconfiguring of power structures reflects a type of well-intentioned, surface-level equity work in two ways. First, representational diversity, by itself, does little to undermine sexist and racist organizational practices, routines, and narratives (Ahmed, 2012). Second, the inclusion of a more diverse group of people does not necessitate the reimagining of normed power relations. Instead, disrupting the status quo requires active engagement to shift practice and re-center non-dominant epistemologies.

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