



ADVANCING EQUITY

# Practice Brief:

## Introduction to Advancing Equity

## Learning Objectives

**After reviewing this practice brief you will be able to:**

1. Begin to understand the sociocultural and historical roots of systemic oppression and inequities in school systems.
2. Make connections between institutional and systemic inequities in your own context and practice.
3. Explain the purpose and aim of equity work in schools.
4. Reflect on your own power and responsibility in equity work in schools.

## Background

US schools have a long history of disciplinary practices that have resulted in vast racial inequities. Such practices include exclusionary discipline practices (e.g., out-of-school suspensions, in-school suspensions) that have been disproportionately used with students of color and students with disabilities. Additionally, after the passing of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in 2001, the interaction of zero tolerance policies and high stakes testing led to the push-out phenomenon (Simson, 2013), which refers to removing students displaying “problem” behavior from the classroom or school.

To this day, schools continue to have systems and policies that result in practices that perpetuate social inequalities and reproduce systems of oppression. Examples of such inequities include:

- Schools with higher numbers of racially minoritized students tend to be more resource-deprived, resulting in larger class sizes, more limited and lower-quality materials, lower quality course offerings, and fewer extra-curricular offerings (Darling-Hammond, 2007; La Salle et al., 2020).
- There is a documented gap in academic outcomes between white and Black students, which has been linked to the disproportionate use of exclusionary discipline for Black students (Gregory et al., 2010).
- Beginning in preschool, minoritized students are systematically excluded from school at alarming rates through the use of office discipline referrals, suspensions, and expulsions (e.g., Fenning & Rose, 2007; Bradshaw et al., 2010; Gilliam et al., 2016; Mallet, 2015; Skiba et al., 2011). Students suspended or expelled from school are more likely to have contact with the criminal justice system.



Photo by CDC on Unsplash

## Where does MTSS-B fit in?

MTSS was designed as a framework for providing proactive and systemic approaches to supporting student behavior, and to reduce the use of exclusionary discipline (e.g., suspensions, expulsions). Although schools using MTSS-B report declines in exclusionary discipline (Musu et al., 2019), racial inequities continue. Fallon et al., 2023 summarize five criticisms of MTSS-B related to its ability to address racial inequities:

## Criticisms of Traditional MTSS-B

### Rooted in Behaviorism

MTSS-B was founded on behavioral principles, which have been criticized for being race-neutral and emphasizing “changing” or “fixing” individual behavior, without attending to historical, sociopolitical, and institutional context.

### Emphasized Management

MTSS-B has historically focused on rules and discipline designed to manage students and create spaces that reinforce predominantly white and female social views of behavior. Community members are often not involved in designing rules/spaces.

### Ignores Systemic Causes

MTSS-B traditionally ignored root causes of racial disparities in discipline such as racial oppression or mismatches in identities between teachers and students.

### Deficit-Focused

MTSS-B has been criticized for focusing on reducing “negative” behavior, but failing to promote strengths and protective factors (Jones & Neblett, 2017).

### Failed to Center Equity

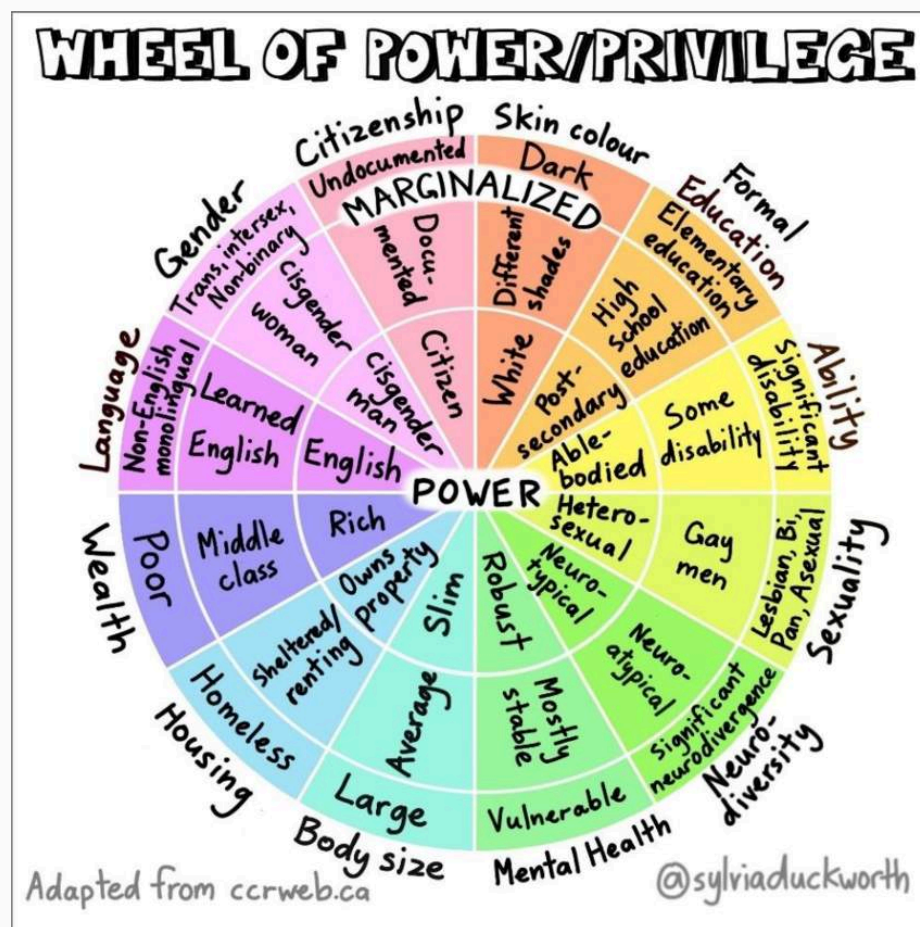
Culturally responsive practices were not initially integrated into the conceptualization of MTSS-B (Gregory et al., 2017). As such, some schools implement MTSS-B without consideration for how it may need to be adapted to attend to their students’ culture.



# Power, Privilege & Oppression in Schools

Students' experiences and outcomes in schools are impacted by aspects of their identity (e.g., race, disability status, socioeconomic status, etc.). Therefore, when school staff are not aware of their power and privilege, they can recreate or reinforce the same social inequalities that exist in the wider society. **Equity work requires being aware of power and privilege dynamics in schools and acting intentionally to disrupt them.**

The image below is a visual example that demonstrates some of the ways that people's identities can impact their experiences of power (or privilege) and marginalization (or oppression). In addition to the identities depicted above, there may be other identities that are central to a person's experience of power and marginalization (for example, religion, family status, age).



As you look at the chart above, notice that identities toward the center tend to have more power and privilege in our society.

Take a moment to locate your own identities and the identities of people in your school community on the wheel. How do you see these identities impacting your own and others' school experiences?



# Reflection into Practice

There are many ways, from small acts to large shifts, that teachers can enact in their classrooms, on their teams, and in their schools to move in the direction of equity. Equity-centered education can look like:

- Honoring individuals' history and journey
- Encouraging creativity
- Promoting self-exploration
- Initiating students to actively co-create the learning process
- Critically examining expectations of (educator) control

## Equity-Focused Examples

### Co-Constructing Norms

Rather than presenting a list of predetermined expectations, a teacher facilitates a class discussion about how they would like their learning environment to feel and how they will create that space. **They ask:** What kind of environment do you need to learn? How do you learn best? How will we navigate students' different learning needs? What routines or structures might help us learn together? How will we respond to disruption or harm?

### Relating

A teacher takes daily time to get to know their students and intentionally makes connections between the material and students' lives/interests. The teacher also creates meaningful moments throughout each unit for students to reflect on how the material applies to their own lives.

### Letting Go

After discussing and practicing bathroom expectations with students, an elementary school teacher allows students to go to the bathroom whenever they need (1 at a time), by simply taking the pass by the door. If they notice a student over-using or mis-using the pass, they have a conversation with the student to ask them about it and offer support to stay in the room.

### Critically Examine

A history teacher gives students the opportunity to take a critical look at their textbook chapter on the Civil War. **They ask:** What are your initial reactions, thoughts, feelings about the chapter? Whose voices are included? Whose voices are missing? What images are used? What messages do they convey? What do they conceal? What questions, wonderings, criticisms come up for you?

# Conclusion

Traditional disciplinary structures in schools have centered practices that ignore systemic oppression, center white expectations of compliance, and disproportionately target students of color and students with disabilities. In order to combat inequities in schools, teachers must be aware of their own privilege and power within the system and can implement a variety of student-centered, culturally responsive, and asset-based strategies. Future practice briefs in the Advancing Equity series will dive deeper into specific strategies in the following areas:



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