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Book Review

Smith, D., Frey, N., Pumpian, I., & Fisher, D. (2017). *Building Equity: Policies and Practices to Empower All Learners.* Alexandria, VA: ASCD. 199 pp. ISBN 978-1416624264 (paperpack). $ 23.68

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Smith, Frey, Pumpian, and Fisher authored the book, *Building Equity: Policies and Practices to Empower All Learners* (2017) to not only discuss the differences between equity and equality within a school, but to provide tools and examples to go about transitioning a school in order to create a more equitable environment. The vignettes and strategies shared throughout the book are not simply hypotheticals but are actual experiences of lessons learned – both positive and negative. The authors strive to convince the readers that when equity, not equality, becomes the focus of a school, students are more likely to realize their potential and work towards accomplishing it.

The authors organized the book in a way that it uses three tools created by the authors to outline the content. The authors have developed a Building Equity Taxonomy, a Building Equity Review, and a Building Equity Full Audit. The Building Equity Taxonomy is a hierarchical model that describes the five categories of learning objectives that will assist a school in creating a more equitable culture among their student and staff. In order to provide assist a school in identifying and using the taxonomy correctly, the authors provided a 25-question survey called the Building Equity Review. Each level of the taxonomy has five statements in which the staff in a school would either agree or disagree, which could lead to a meaningful dialogue about strengths, weaknesses, and areas of growth. If school administrators determine the need for a more extensive review, the Building Equity Audit is available. This tool would be used when a school is looking at making a bigger change and includes surveys that can be used for staff, students, and parents.

To provide a common understanding of terminology, Smith et al. (2017) outlined the differences between equality and equity. Achieving equality ensures that each person is receiving the same treatment, services, or materials that everyone else is receiving. Equity means that each person is getting what he or she needs in order to be successful. While many school administrators strive to provide equality to all their students, the authors reiterate that there is often not an equitable distribution of resources. Equality used to be perceived as primarily focused on race, but now goes on to include ethnicity, language, gender, sexual orientation and disability.

Smith et al. (2017) provided compelling and motivating information on each of the levels of the taxonomy and how they directly impact students both now and as they progress through life. The physical integration of all students into the school community by ensuring diversity throughout the learning environment should be best practices in all buildings. The establishment of an inclusive school environment satisfies each student's individual needs and provide the appropriate supports in order help the student to realize his or her potential. In some cases, the

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necessary supports are academic, but in others, the social and emotional engagement are paramount.

Throughout the text, the importance of relationships and being knowledgeable about students was continuously emphasized. This is especially helpful when a student has violated a rule or policy, potentially resulting in negative consequences. I am in complete agreement with the authors' philosophies on restorative practices when it comes to discipline. When I was an assistant principal, I followed these ideals as often as I could. Unfortunately, with the new legislative mandates regarding safety and security, schools in Florida do not have the latitude to offer disciplinary options. As districts are being required to enforce and report on disciplinary infractions, school administrators are limited in their ability to work through restorative practices which, in many cases, would be far more beneficial for students than being sent to alternative schools.

Students, regardless of academic history, need to be provided with a variety of opportunities to access rigorous curriculum and be challenged to stretch themselves. The authors explained the importance of having high expectations for all students and thoughtfully building classroom rosters to include a more balanced approach that is inclusive of gender and specialized support needs. Students in all classrooms would then be offered challenging curriculum that was thoughtfully planned by the teachers. While these types of learning activities allow students to engage in the content and develop their soft skills, teachers are able to circulate through the room and provide individualized support through questioning, probing, or even working with small groups as needed. This approach to differentiation allows staff to adjust to the needs of the individuals based around the content and the task (Andrews, 2017). The authors pointed out that, by naturally pulling students out to work with a teacher, the group is becoming segregated from the rest of the class and can often miss critical instruction.

A particularly powerful chapter was one in which the authors outlined engaging and inspiring leaders by allowing students to take responsibility for the future. The suggestions the authors provided for how to ensure all students have a leadership opportunity and are part of the decision-making process made me long to be back in a school building. One framework that has aided some of our elementary schools in creating student leadership opportunities is the Covey's Leader In Me model (Covey, Covey, Summers, & Hatch, 2014). Students and teachers in those schools actively set individual, class, and grade level goals and monitor progress towards those goals. The schools have student leadership teams that facilitate various responsibilities around the buildings and play a major role in decision making. Our district has three elementary schools that have received "Lighthouse School" status which has had a major impact on both the culture and academic successes of the buildings.

As a reader, I appreciated the use of examples that spanned across elementary, middle, and high schools. The authors shared perspectives of administrators, teachers, and students which gave insight into some of what our own staff and students could be feeling. The transparency with which the authors shared how the concerns were initiated and then presented to staff was relatable to anyone who has worked in a building. It was refreshing to learn about how the teachers grappled with these initiatives and then came to a resolution in order to best meet the needs of the students.

The authors presented many key issues that resonated with the work we are either currently doing or are planning to do in the district where I work. Many of those key issue are related to social emotional learning. Our school district in southwest Florida has focused on curricular strategies and instructional models, but, until recently, we have not been focusing our efforts on meeting the social emotional needs as an organization. The inclusion of an advisory period was

mentioned in the book. The authors mentioned how one school used a set period at the end of the day when students were meeting with a teacher for goal setting, ensuring work was turned in, and providing teachers the time to get to know students so they can best know how to support individual students. This is a strategy that we are working to implement for all middle and high school students. I plan to suggest the format that was shared in the example of doing it at the end of the day and ensuring that practices and club meetings do not begin until after that period so that students and their parents understand it is a valuable part of the day. Also, this advisory time helps to build the relationships between staff and students so that each student knows that he or she has someone in the building that is an advocate for them.

Another validation mentioned in the book was the importance of sharing the purpose of lessons with students early and often and the use of mastery-based grading practices. We have been working to incorporate these two strategies for several years. Teachers are finally seeing the value of sharing the intended outcome of the lesson with students, but it has been a challenge. Additionally, we have been using mastery-based grading practices but only in our elementary schools. While it was a paradigm shift for many, elementary teachers are finally seeing the benefits of meaningful grading practices, but this has not moved to middle and high schools. The authors expressed some of the ways teachers were using grades for compliance tasks or as punishment. This is an ongoing issue with our secondary teachers, as many school-based departments are not using uniform grading practices. It would be interesting to share the scenarios presented by the authors to administrators to help bolster the grading conversations within their buildings.

I truly connected with the author's primary emphasis on student choice and leadership opportunities. As a classroom teacher, I utilized some of those concepts within my own classroom; however, as an administrator, I do not see those options being given to students very often. One example in the book was the use of Genius Hour activities consisting of mixed-grade level groupings working together on a project that they are interested in. We have Genius Hour built into our curriculum maps, but the idea of mixed grade level groupings is a wonderful way to allow students to interact with those outside their classroom who have a shared interest.

After completing the book, I realized that many of the areas addressed in the text have been embedded in our readings so far this semester. Much like Joyce, Weil, and Calhoun (2015), Smith et al. (2017) used classroom scenarios and real-life examples to illustrate their critical points. Another area of emphasis from *Building Equity* was the idea of preparing students for life beyond high school. Hmelo-Silver, Duncan, and Chinn (2007) echoed many of the key competencies and instructional strategies mentioned in the text. Providing students with the opportunities to problem solve and collaborate are just a few of the skills that will allow students to be engaged, to practice self-efficacy and to be prepared for the 21st century job market.

Building Equity (2017) is an exceptional read and should be required for all district and school-based administrators. The authors provide practical, thought-provoking strategies that have value in every aspect of education. They are not just talking about making changes, but they have actually used these practices with the students in the building they serve. While some of the examples may not be viable for every school immediately, the insights of the teachers and students shared in the text could have an impact on any reader and provide a shift in mindset that could be applied to a variety of situations.

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