FOREWORD BY MICHAEL FULLAN

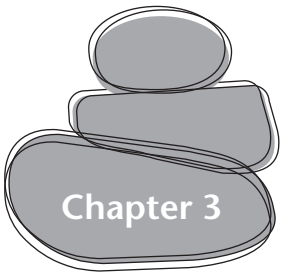
SHANE SAFIR

THE LISTENING LEADER

CREATING THE CONDITIONS FOR EQUITABLE SCHOOL TRANSFORMATION



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Listening for Equity

Preview: In this chapter, we cultivate awareness by tuning in to critical equity "channels."

This chapter is designed to help you:

- Explore how racial bias and cultural insensitivity can undermine a healthy staff culture.
- Tune in to structural racism, unconscious bias, and cultural difference.
- Gain powerful language and tools to listen and lead for equity.

THE FRAGILITY OF TRUST ACROSS DIFFERENCE

Joy returned to school after a tedious principals' meeting. Entering the building, she saw an image taped to her closed office door—visible to anyone passing by. Approaching, she found the cover of a recent issue of *Scholastic* magazine featuring a photo of a monkey-like creature with a long nose; attached was a yellow sticky note that read "Good morning!"

An African American woman in her 50s, Joy was immediately triggered. "What the hell?" she said to herself as she thought of the racist history of Black people being associated with monkeys. In the staff room, Joy found a group of teachers—including a White woman named Wendy who was the school's designated equity teacher leader—sitting around the table. "Does anyone know who put the *Scholastic* thing on my door?" The teachers chuckled and glanced sheepishly at one another. "Cause I'm really offended by it," she declared. The room fell silent as Joy walked out, shaking her head and unnerved by the lack of response.

Wendy sat frozen, her mind scrutinizing the ridiculous image she had shown several colleagues before placing it on her principal's door with the hope of making her laugh. In their 2 years as colleagues, she and Joy had discovered a similar sense of humor and playful banter. They had joined the staff together, finding an adult culture in upheaval, and would joke, "It was broken when we got it!" Under the previous top-down leader, the community splintered into warring factions: teachers against administration, competing parent groups, African American instructional aides in tension with the majority-White teaching staff.

In this contentious climate, Joy and Wendy bonded over their shared passion for equity. They spoke frankly about race and racism, exchanged personal stories, and brainstormed how to address teachers' unconscious biases toward students. They planned staff meetings to discuss the "preschool to prison" pipeline. After 2 years of Joy's inclusive leadership style, it felt as though a new era had dawned. As Wendy describes it, "A lot of trust had developed. We were out of the woods in terms of the posttraumatic stress teachers had experienced, and the school felt stable."

When Joy confronted the group in the staff room, Wendy at first thought that her boss was feigning anger, but she sensed that something was off. Then it clicked: "Oh my god, it's a monkey." In Wendy's words, "My whole emotional and mental state went into a blur. I realized that I had done something really bad even though I hadn't intended to. I felt extremely misunderstood—not a feeling of self-pity, but more of mortification and shame because I prided myself on doing so much reading and work with White teachers about race." She grabbed a rose from a lunchroom bouquet and went out to recess to find Joy.

"I'm so sorry," Wendy said. "I put the image there. I thought it would lighten up your day and make you laugh." As a White woman, Wendy hadn't considered how an African American colleague would experience the cartoon. Still reeling, Joy took a deep breath and replied, "I understand that was your intention, but having a picture of a monkey on my door for everyone to see was very offensive and degrading to me." After a tense exchange, they parted ways, and Wendy went to her classroom, shut the door, and sobbed. Later she reflected, "I felt badly that I had hurt someone with whom I had a lot of trust and solidarity."

Joy retreated into her office and shut the door as well. She felt utterly humiliated and lost and couldn't believe that Wendy would do something so thoughtless. Joy recently shared, "This was a person I had hired and believed in, someone who shared my vision of equity and social justice.

I had even appointed her as the equity teacher leader! How could she insult me like this?" Over the next few days, Joy grappled with how to address the incident. First she emailed Wendy articles about the profound history behind the image, but she heard nothing back.

A week later, Joy stood uncomfortably before her mostly White staff and said, "Today we're going to talk about cultural insensitivity, and how we sometimes inadvertently disregard a person's culture and identity." As her narrative unspooled, the room grew increasingly tense. By now, much of the staff held pieces of the backstory, and people began exchanging nervous glances. Joy closed by saying, "I felt offended by this incident, but I wanted to share it as an example of how we need to understand other people's backgrounds and think about the ramifications of our actions."

Suddenly, Wendy raised a shaking hand and stammered, "Listen, this was me. I didn't do it out of malice. I'm not a racist. I didn't realize the connotation it had." As Wendy continued, Joy thought to herself, *This isn't about being a "racist." It's about cultural insensitivity.* The room seemed to sway toward Wendy, and Joy was devastated: "The staff did a 180. They didn't give me the benefit of the doubt and jumped on her side." Wendy, in the meantime, felt "very betrayed" that Joy had presented the story without checking in with her first: "She didn't make any effort to preserve my dignity."

In the ensuing weeks, teachers and staff members circled their wagons around Wendy. A few people told Joy that she had handled the situation "inappropriately." She was stunned. How had she, an African American principal reeling from a racialized incident, become the culprit? As the weeks passed, the relationship between Joy and Wendy hovered at a tense register. Where would they go from here?

Joy and Wendy are former colleagues of mine who entrusted me to tell this vulnerable story as a text for learning. If we look at their story using the core tenets from Chapter 2, we see how both women's emotional brains were hijacked by the situation. We see variations of fight, flight, and tend-and-befriend behaviors across the school, and we see the urgent need to "water for deep roots" (Chapter 2 brain mandate) with respect to the staff's awareness around race and equity—to cultivate a shared language and understanding of the issues at play. This last point brings us to the heart of this chapter, which provides specific tools for examining racism, bias, and cultural difference in our schools.

TABLE 3.1 EQUITY CHANNELS

Channel	Brief Description
Awareness of structural racism	Tuning in to the overlapping social structures and systems that produce racialized outcomes, including education, employment, transportation, housing, health care, and criminal justice
Awareness of unconscious bias	Tuning in to the perceptions, attitudes, and stereotypes that unconsciously affect people's beliefs, actions, and decisions
Awareness of cultural difference	Tuning in and attributing positive value to cultural difference and embracing a learning stance with respect to culture



What does it mean to listen and lead for equity? What land mines await the equity-driven leader? How can we develop trust across difference, skill to engage in hard conversations, and courage to interrupt inequitable practices in the classroom and the staffroom?

What does it mean to listen and lead for equity? What land mines await the equity-driven leader? How can we develop trust across difference, skill to engage in hard conversations, and courage to interrupt inequitable practices in the classroom and the staff room? Because so much of school transformation hinges on racial and cultural inequity, we must develop a robust vocabulary around these issues. A rigorous and daily analysis of equity issues will complement our understanding of the brain as we work to create great schools for every child. Chapter 3 addresses this need by helping us tune in to three critical "channels" of awareness: structural racism, unconscious bias, and cultural difference. Table 3.1 offers a sneak preview.

TUNING IN TO STRUCTURAL RACISM

Racialized outcomes do not require racist actors.

—john a. powell, director of the UC Berkeley Haas Institute for a Fair and Inclusive Society

To build equitable schools and systems, we must first acknowledge the sociopolitical context in which they sit—those overlapping policies, practices, and institutions that uphold inequity.[1] We begin by tuning in to awareness

of **structural racism**, namely, the ways in which systems of education, employment, transportation, housing, health care, and criminal justice conspire to produce racialized *outcomes*, regardless of the intentions of individual people.[2] Although these institutions affect poor White people as well as people of color, it is important to name the ways that race and class intersect to magnify the oppression of people of color in America.

Listening to this channel, we reject the myth of "color blindness" and acknowledge that people have unequal access to opportunity and freedom. In her powerful book *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, civil rights advocate Michelle Alexander discusses the metaphor of a birdcage (see Figure 3.1) to help us conceptualize structural racism:

> If one thinks about racism by examining only one wire of the cage, or one form of disadvantage, it is difficult to understand how and why the bird is trapped. Only a large number of wires arranged in a specific way, and connected to one another, serve to enclose the bird and to ensure that it cannot escape.[3]

Working together, these wires generate racialized outcomes for different groups, even in the absence of explicitly racist actors.[4]

Sometimes the "bird" does escape, but at a steep emotional or physical price. I think of the food deserts of East Oakland where my partner taught for many years and had to drive several miles to purchase a healthy lunch, a reality that neighborhood families continually endured. I think of June Jordan School for Equity students whose families left San Francisco due to rising housing costs, but still commuted 3 hours per day to access a quality education. I think of Michael, a homeless White student who lived with his mentally ill mother in a bus that relocated every day, but who still woke up, got dressed, and took himself and his siblings to school.

Structural racism helps us view schools as **opportunity structures** that create and distribute society's benefits and hardships.[5] Table 3.2 tells this story by contrasting professor john a. powell's hometown of Detroit and the prosperous community where his stepdaughter attended high school. Similarly, my children attend an opportunity-rich public school in Oakland, California; parents raise funds for special programs, children stroll to school through a quiet neighborhood, and experienced teachers stay for many years. Although the student body has historically been both racially and socioeconomically diverse, gentrification is shifting the landscape toward affluent, predominantly White families. Here structural racism is playing out at the intersection of housing and education.

FIGURE 3.1 THE BIRDCAGE AS A METAPHOR FOR STRUCTURAL RACISM



TABLE 3.2 A TALE OF HIGH-OPPORTUNITY AND LOW-OPPORTUNITY STRUCTURES

High Opportunity	• The year powell's stepdaughter finished high school, 100% of students graduated and 100% went on to college. • Most students will never drive by a jail. • Bus services are free. • The city has a relatively easy time attracting capital investment. • It is very safe and full of beautiful parks. • It's easy to purchase fresh, healthy food.
Low Opportunity	• Less than 25% of students in Detroit finish high school. • More than 60% of men will spend time in jail. • Soon, there may be no bus services in some parts of town. • It is not very safe, and there are few parks. • It's quite difficult to access fresh, healthy food.

Note. Adapted from the work of john a. powell, director of the UC Berkeley Haas Institute for a Fair and Inclusive Society

This channel interrupts the dominant narrative that explains inequity through individual traits or effort—"If only students had more grit, character, or self-discipline"; "If only families worked harder or invested in their children's education." Such statements distract educators from addressing root causes, such as the unequal distribution of resources within and across school systems. In a powerful modeling of Discourse II to call out the impact of structural racism, pedagogical theorist Gloria J. Ladson-Billings charges America with accumulating an "education debt" to generations of students of color and students trapped in poverty.[6]



Schools can operate as spaces of transformation that interrupt racialized patterns of success and failure, or as spaces of reproduction that sustain inequality.

Schools can operate as spaces of transformation that interrupt racialized patterns of success and failure, or as spaces of reproduction that sustain inequality. Transformational schools move the equity needle by weakening or eliminating the education wire on the birdcage, cracking open space for the bird to wiggle out.

When tuning in to structural racism, I remind myself that . . .

- People are differently "situated" with respect to opportunity, contrary to the fantasy of a color-blind or meritocratic society.
- Our societal structures and institutions are designed to produce racialized inequitable outcomes in schools.
- As powell writes, "racialized outcomes don't require racist actors." You don't have to be "a racist" or have racist intent to contribute to and reinforce structural racism.
- Schools are microcosms of the sociopolitical context.

- Structural racism shapes unequal access to opportunity, including experienced teachers, rigorous instruction, clean and healthy facilities, and enrichment programs.
- Racially unequal outcomes are more than the sum of individual and group behavior.
- A person's social location—or where he or she is situated with respect to race, class, and gender—influences his or her experience in the school system.
- I *can* influence outcomes by making structural changes in my school or organization and by building authentic partnerships with families and community.

When tuning in to structural racism, I ask the following questions . . .

- What opportunity structures are available to my students and their families?
- What opportunity structures do they lack access to?
- To what extent does our staff live within the same social and structural reality as our students? If there's a gap, how does it manifest in the classroom and in staff perceptions and discourse around students and families?
- What is *my* social location, or access to opportunity, as a leader? How does that influence how I'm perceived and positioned with students, families, colleagues, and supervisors?
- How is our school situated within local opportunity structures and in the broader community?
- What role has our school played historically in helping families gain access to opportunity?
- How can our school play a role in supporting families to gain access to opportunity?

For a printable version of this tool, go to my website: shanesafir.com/resources.

Joy and Wendy's Story: Tuning in to Structural Racism (Channel 1)

Joy and Wendy's school enrolls a racially and economically diverse student body, but sits in a wealthy, predominantly White neighborhood. Many students of color take district buses or travel across town to get to school, and the majority-White staff did not fully reflect the student body at this time. As the school's first African American principal, Joy began to address this

demographic gap by recruiting more teachers of color. The school was well positioned to benefit from her commitment to equity and her insight as a woman of color in leadership.

However, when Joy chose to publicly reflect on the painful incident, the staff rallied around Wendy, dropping into an individualistic narrative and insisting that Wendy was "not a racist." Tuning in to structural racism could have helped the staff understand that a racialized outcome—in this case, Joy's trauma in confronting the image—does not require a consciously racist actor, and that impact matters more than intent. Had she not been emotionally hijacked herself, Wendy could have demonstrated cross-racial allyship by helping educate her White colleagues on the historical subtext and connotations of the image.

Instead, their coalition dissolved in the wake of the incident and in the face of Wendy's shame and Joy's hurt. Rather than reckoning with the ingrained nature of structural racism, the staff defended Wendy and lost an opportunity to learn and grow together.

TUNING IN TO UNCONSCIOUS BIAS

Unconscious bias, also called implicit bias, refers to the attitudes and stereotypes that unconsciously affect a person's perceptions, actions, and decisions.[7] Did you know that the vast majority of our thoughts live in the brain's unconscious networks? We are continually bombarded by biased messages from the dominant culture that communicate to the unconscious about the relative worth and humanity of women, people of color, and other groups. In the absence of awareness and a conscious equity stance, the brain begins to code other people as more or less valuable and more or less threatening. Concretely, the prefrontal cortex lights up when we view someone as "highly human," but fails to activate when we dehumanize people.[8] Unconscious biases cut off the circuits that enable empathy and connection.

On a day-to-day level, unconscious biases are often the culprit behind **microaggressions** in schools—routine verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights or insults that communicate hostile, degrading, and negative messages to people of color.[9] (Table 3.3 provides examples of microaggressions and the messages they communicate.) In cutting to deep layers of identity, these incidents diminish a person's sense of safety and well-being. For all educators, and particularly those from the dominant culture, it's important to pay attention to the message *received* and its effect on the recipient, rather than to the message *intended* by the speaker. "But I didn't

TABLE 3.3 RECOGNIZING MICROAGGRESSIONS AND THEIR IMPLICIT MESSAGES

Theme	Example	Message
Alien in One's Own Land When Asian Americans, Latino Americans and others who look different or are named differently from the dominant culture are assumed to be foreign-born	"Where are you from or where were you born?" "You speak English very well." "What are you? You're so interesting looking!"	You are not a true American. You are a perpetual foreigner in your own country. Your ethnic/racial identity makes you exotic.
Color Blindness Statements that indicate that a White person does not want to or need to acknowledge race.	"When I look at you, I don't see color." "There is only one race, the human race." "America is a melting pot." "I don't believe in race." Denying the experiences of students by questioning the credibility and validity of their stories.	Assimilate to the dominant culture. Denying the significance of a person of color's racial/ethnic experience and history. Denying the individual as a racial/cultural being.
Pathologizing Cultural Values/Communication Styles The notion that the values and communication styles of the dominant/White culture are ideal/"normal."	To an Asian, Latino or Native American: "Why are you so quiet? We want to know what you think. Be more verbal." "Speak up more." Asking a Black person: "Why do you have to be so loud/animated? Just calm down." "Why are you always angry?" anytime race is brought up in the classroom discussion. Dismissing an individual who brings up race/culture in work/school setting.	Assimilate to dominant culture. Leave your cultural baggage outside. There is no room for difference.

Note. From *Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Race, Gender and Sexual Orientation,* by Derald Wing Sue, 2010, Hoboken, NJ: Wiley. Reprinted with permission.

mean it that way!" can easily become a safety valve for maintaining White racial equilibrium and Discourse I.

As we tune in to this channel, several findings emerge. First, all of us harbor unconscious beliefs that affect our perceptions of others—and often of ourselves. Harvard psychologist Mahzarin Banaji and her colleagues developed the Implicit Association Test to assess for unconscious associations in areas like race, gender, age, and appearance.[10] They've collected data from millions of anonymous test-takers, with illuminating



Become aware of your biases so that you can interrupt them. Before entering a conversation with a parent or colleague who may trigger you, take a 10-second pause to ask yourself: What are my biases toward this person? How can I disrupt those automated thoughts so that I can genuinely listen to him or her?

findings. For example, people over 60 and 20-year-olds show an equally strong bias toward youth—probably because the elderly are a stigmatized group. Along the same lines, close to 80% of White and half of African American participants show a pro-White bias even after claiming no racial preference.[11]

Second, it's important to distinguish implicit biases from willful acts of discrimination; the former are the brain's distorted attempt to find patterns amid a flood of incoming, often highly distorted data. This fact points toward a key solution: Become aware of your biases so that you can interrupt them. Before entering a conversation with a parent or colleague who may trigger you, take a 10-second pause to ask yourself: *What are my biases toward this person? How can I disrupt those automated thoughts so that I can genuinely listen to him or her?* As a principal, I recall practicing this with a parent who often demanded my attention and triggered a flight response. When I was able to pause, I noticed that I had written her off as "needy" without truly listening to her needs. This allowed me to show up with more presence and compassion.

Finally, we can't afford to ignore the far-reaching effects of unconscious bias in schools:

Disproportionality in discipline Policies that appear racially neutral on their face, but result in the overrepresentation of students of color—particularly Black boys—in suspensions, expulsions, and referrals for subjective infractions like "defiance"

Disproportionality in special education Misguided placements and the overrepresentation of culturally and linguistically diverse students in special education

Detrimental teacher mindsets and beliefs Underestimating the intellectual capacity of culturally and linguistically diverse students, and often girls, inside the classroom

Unfair tracking of students School policies that disproportionally place students of color in low-level classes, or limit their access to honors and Advanced Placement courses

Discourse I Ways of talking about students and families that diminish, pathologize, or even criminalize them

Inequitable staff power dynamics Marginalization of, and glass ceilings imposed on, staff of color and women; on the flip side, men and/or White people being given credit for other people's ideas

How can we lead for equity in the face of these systemic challenges? We must understand that biases stem from developmental experiences—where one grows up, lives, and socializes. A study by the PRRI found, for example, that White Americans have social networks that are 91% White. (Among African Americans, 83% of social networks are also African American, and for Latinos, 64% are Latino.)[12] One result of this pattern is that our most diverse schools are often staffed by White teachers who grew up in segregated communities. Where structural racism maintains racial separation, people's lived realities can produce exaggerated perceptions of difference and high levels of threat and fear.



Here's the good news: If biases have been learned, they can surely be unlearned. As a leader, you can engineer experiences that build bridges and challenge misconceptions.

Here's the good news: If biases have been learned, they can surely be unlearned. As a leader, you can engineer experiences that build bridges and challenge misconceptions. Embrace storientation by helping your staff safely share their stories across difference. Support people to increase awareness of their identity, including areas of power, privilege, and disadvantage. Promote an understanding of intersectionality, or the ways in which race, class, and gender overlap to create systems of oppression and discrimination. Model the value of an inclusive society with every interaction and message.

When tuning in to unconscious bias, I remind myself that . . .

- Schools aren't race neutral or "color blind," as seductive as that thinking can be. We are not in a postracial era, and we are all vulnerable to implicit biases.
- Bias is a universal human condition that we must recognize and manage; it is not a personal defect.
- We all carry biases from swimming in the waters of a racialized society.
- Implicit biases can be internalized by nondominant groups (i.e., people of color, women, etc.) and feed a pattern of **negative self-talk**—internal commentary on one's failings.

- Focusing on individual acts of racism, or weeding out the "bad people," won't solve the fundamental problem.
- Implicit bias is an involuntary reflex rooted in the unconscious mind and distinct from explicit, targeted racism.
- As a shortcut the brain takes to process data, implicit bias relies on common stereotypes.
- Implicit bias and structural racism work together to produce racist outcomes even without racist intent.
- I can slow down and tune in to my own biases. With awareness, I can replace biases with listening and with affirming thoughts.
- I can track classroom behaviors that interrupt bias and those that spiral into bias.
- I can track and interrupt microaggressions in the classroom and the staff culture.
- Becoming aware of implicit biases is a key element of emotional intelligence.
- The first step to interrupting implicit bias is to listen with empathy (we will unpack the leadership stance of mature empathy in Chapter 5) and develop a nuanced understanding of who a person is.

When tuning in to unconscious bias, I ask the following questions . . .

- Where do I see implicit biases playing out in our school culture?
- What fear or apprehension do I have about addressing implicit bias?
- How can I serve as an ally to colleagues, students, and families who experience bias in our school?
- What have been my own experiences of implicit bias, as victim or perpetrator?
- What assumptions have been made about me that represent an incomplete or distorted story?
- When I think of a staff member with whom I've struggled to build trust, what assumptions might I have made about this colleague or she of me? How might implicit bias be at play?

Joy and Wendy's Story: Tuning in to Unconscious Bias (Channel 2)

We all have unconscious biases—it's part of being human—and, even when we bring awareness to them, we can't always know how these biases affect our actions. Regardless of Wendy's intentions, her decision to leave the image on Joy's office door hijacked Joy's emotional brain, which was

already on guard. In her words, "This was a horrible experience for an African American administrator who is always dealing with identity threats. How many times have I met a White parent and introduced myself as the principal only to have them say with surprise, 'Oh, *you're* the principal?!?'"

As the incident became public, Discourse I kicked in to consolidate a single story: "Wendy isn't a racist," and "Joy is being too sensitive." Swept up in a collective amygdala hijack, the staff lost its ability to be reflective—to ask, What could we learn from this moment, together?

How can such a school tune in to unconscious bias to prevent and address such incidents? A more diverse staff, or a staff with increased awareness of this channel, might have paused to listen deeply to Joy's experience and to engage in the necessary, if difficult, conversations around bias. Chapter 10 depicts this type of staff culture in the context of tensions around gender and gender bias.

TUNING IN TO CULTURAL DIFFERENCE

As we strive toward equity, we have to turn up the volume on culture. In 2014, the overall number of students of color in public K–12 schools surpassed the number of White students, while the teaching force continues to hover at around 83% White.[13] This demographic gap can lead to cultural disconnects and biases in the classroom that impact students' opportunities to learn. By building our own and our colleagues' awareness of cultural difference and by prioritizing the hiring of a diverse staff, we can create more inclusive school environments.



Listening Leaders tune in to cultural difference and have the capacity to recognize and respond positively to difference, read subtle cultural cues and adjust their moves, [and] embrace humility and a learning stance with respect to culture.

Listening Leaders tune in to cultural difference and have the capacity to

- Recognize and respond positively to difference
- Read subtle cultural cues and adjust their moves
- Embrace humility and a learning stance with respect to culture

This isn't about memorizing every nuance of every culture you encounter. It's about opening your thoughts, feelings, and behavior beyond the psychological limits of one

culture.[14] It's about listening in ways that foster **cultural synchronicity**—the ability to connect across difference so that you avoid cultural miscommunication cues that act as social threats to the brain. And it's about recognizing that cultural proficiency is a lifelong process that takes active work because culture, language, and context are constantly shifting.

In schools, we may focus on visible and audible manifestations of culture, such as food, dress, customs, and language. We celebrate diversity or host international days, which are perfectly legitimate and worthy activities. As we increase our awareness, we notice cultural differences in ways of communicating, negotiating personal space, relating to time, or expressing respect. All of this matters, but the Listening Leader's most important focus is on tuning in to what my colleague Zaretta Hammond calls **deep culture**—ways of seeing and experiencing the world that stem from unconscious assumptions, mental models, and worldviews.[15] It is our deep culture that governs how we learn and process new information.

The reality is that even though there are clearly patterns within any cultural group, there are also endless permutations of deep cultural schema. The nuances of culture can vary from street to street and block to block! Listening is the pathway to understanding those subtleties in your own context.



MAKE IT MINDFUL

Think of someone with whom you've struggled to build an alliance. What do you understand about her cultural schema, or frame of reference? What are her driving beliefs and values and her ethical worldview, or sense of right and wrong? What tacit knowledge does she hold about the world? Now consider: To what extent are you culturally in sync with this person?

In addition to cultivating self-awareness, the Listening Leader recognizes the presence of a **dominant culture in schooling** that tends to promote

- Individualism and individual achievement over team success
- Independence and self-reliance over interdependence
- Technical, or "hard" skills, *over* relational, or "soft" skills
- Competition over collaboration
- Quiet, stillness, and compliance over talk, movement, and critical thinking

These individualistic values have roots in the Industrial Age when public schools were designed like factories, and businesses needed compliant workers. My colleague Abby Soriano, an instructional coach in San Jose, California, refers to the dominant culture in schooling as akin to a vestigial organ the body no longer needs, but which remains present. Not only has our economic reality transformed, but also these ways of being and learning are culturally incongruent for the majority of students (and many educators!) in contemporary classrooms.

A friend of mine quit her job at a charter school after a supervisor insinuated that her focus on relationships and community was preventing a "sense of urgency," and demanded that she use "bell-to-bell instruction." A woman of color with an equity lens, this teacher possesses a profound sense of urgency, but her instructional methods—relationships first, responsive pacing, collaborative group work—were out of sync with her White, middle-class supervisor. Joking that she didn't want to strap on a headpiece and become a Zumba instructor, she left the school just as test scores came out showing that 100% of her students had passed her subject area's high-stakes test. By failing to tune in to cultural difference, this leader lost a strong teacher.

Cultural proficiency is not so much a skill you acquire as an orientation—a way of being that listening supports. A Listening Leader is:

- Committed to self-awareness, consistently examining his or her worldview and biases
- Committed to social awareness, embracing the fundamental unity of all human beings while appreciating differences
- Committed to an antiracist agenda, which includes combating racism and "all forms of prejudice and discrimination, through the development of appropriate understanding, attitudes, and social action skills"[16]

Tuning in to culture will help you manifest all three of these commitments and cultivate synchronicity across difference.

When tuning in to cultural difference, I remind myself that . . .

- Culture shapes every person's lens—it's the basis for our schema and mental models of the world.
- To listen and lead across difference, we must first recognize and understand our own cultural worldview. Only then can we begin to understand

the perspectives of our students and families. (This may take more intentionality and conscious work for White educators, who come from a dominant cultural perspective.)
- There is a dominant culture in schooling that may appear neutral, but that privileges students from White, affluent, and/or culturally assimilated backgrounds.
- As equity-driven leaders, we must approach cultural difference with humility and a learning stance.
- Listening Leaders recognize, affirm, and validate cultural differences.
- Listening Leaders are actively antiracist; they combat explicit and implicit forms of racism.
- Listening Leaders build unity and partnerships across difference.

When tuning in to cultural difference, I ask the following questions . . .

- How am I situated with respect to the dominant culture?
- How are my students, families, and colleagues situated with respect to the dominant culture?
- Whom have I promoted or cultivated into leadership roles? Do I lift people up who are culturally different from me?
- With whom do I struggle to form alliances in my school community? With whom do I easily form alliances?
- When faced with a dilemma, to whom do I turn first in my community?
- Whom else could I challenge myself to turn to as I grow my cultural awareness?
- When listening to parents and colleagues, how often do I think explicitly about my cultural lenses and biases?
- How do I view and define the culture of my school?
- Do I see evidence of dominant cultural norms in the classroom and/or schoolwide behavior expectations?
- What behavior patterns are privileged in my school's culture? Which are ascribed a negative value?

Joy and Wendy' Story: Tuning in to Cultural Difference (Channel 3)

Despite their convergent beliefs around equity, Joy and Wendy came from different cultural backgrounds and worldviews. Joy believed that Wendy's action stemmed from a blind spot: "Had she been an African American, she would have immediately recognized that the monkey image is a negative stereotype. She would not have placed it on a door for everyone to see."

At the same time, Joy felt empathy toward Wendy, asserting, "It's hard to know the nuances of everyone's culture. I admit that I don't!" She shared a story about a recently arrived Muslim student from Iraq who spoke limited English. One day, he walked into the office holding a tooth that had just fallen out, and Joy said, "Oh Mousa, you lost your tooth! How wonderful! Let me get you a little holder to save it in for the tooth fairy." The child looked perplexed, which Joy thought indicated a language barrier. To be sure he understood, she grabbed an Arabic-speaking fifth grader to translate the message. The older student informed Joy, "Um, we don't have tooth fairies. We just throw the tooth away."

Joy had to laugh at herself: "Hello! Not everybody has a tooth fairy. It's a different culture. I'm assuming he's going to follow the American custom: Some random person breaks into your house at night and leaves a gift." Tuning in to culture, Joy modeled humility and self-reflection—the reality that "we all make these errors." What if her staff had taken a similar approach with respect to Wendy's painful mistake? What if she and Wendy had supported the staff to develop equity literacy by reading and discussing the history of the image? What does it take to listen and learn across difference? Exhibit 3.1 explores the spectrum of cultural proficiency through a story.

EXHIBIT 3.1 MOVING TOWARD CULTURAL PROFICIENCY

Emmanuel is a Filipino American math teacher at a high school that serves recent immigrants, including a large Yemeni Muslim population. Per the tenets of Islam, Muslim male students must wash their hands and feet before prayer. One day, Emmanuel walked into the school bathroom and saw a group of boys standing around the sink laughing, with water all over the floor. He assumed they were goofing around and made his presence known by standing in the doorway and giving them the teacher Look.

A colleague passed by and said, "You know, they're washing their feet for prayer." This immediately shifted Emmanuel's perspective, but he also knew that the students were fooling around during the ritual, as teenagers frequently do. With new insight, he changed tactics and said "Salaam" (hello in Arabic) as a gentle reminder of *why* they were washing their feet. Instead of saying "Behave yourselves," he tried to communicate "Do this with the right intentions." "Remember your purpose." Following are four ways Emmanuel could have responded to this situation that represent a spectrum of cultural proficiency.

Spectrum of Cultural Proficiency	Possible Action
Cultural denigration See the difference, eradicate it.	Emmanuel might have asked the school to prohibit foot and hand washing because it's "not American."
Cultural insensitivity See the difference, fail to understand it, shame it.	Emmanuel might have chased them out of the bathroom and said, "Stop playing with the water. You're making a mess in here!"
Cultural acceptance See the difference, respond imperfectly in ways that maintain the status quo.	This is basically what happened, in Emmanuel's opinion. Although he saw the difference and allowed the boys to proceed, he realized that the current context for the ritual was inadequate and quite unsafe. The boys were permitted a few minutes out of class to prepare for prayer, but they had to stand and hoist bare feet into a waist-high sink while standing on a wet and slippery school bathroom floor.
Cultural advocacy See the difference, value the difference, change the context.	After this experience, Emmanuel decided to advocate for a bathroom station at which the students could wash their feet safely and with dignity. Looking online, he found two universities that provided such facilities. (He also found many examples of intolerance with signs that said "No foot washing allowed.") Emmanuel dreamed up a solution that would cost less than $100: Purchase a rubber floor mat to prevent tripping. Purchase plastic tubs and chairs. Add a hose extension from the sink to allow for easy access to water. Place Arabic decorations on the wall to create a culturally resonant space and to remind the boys, "This is why you are here." These moves would express, "We're a culturally proficient school that does things for the right reasons. We understand this ritual is important to you, we value you, and we welcome you to pray safely."

Note. Inspired by and adapted from the work of R. B. Lindsey, K. Nuri-Robinsm, and R. D. Terrell in *Cultural Proficiency: A Manual for School Leaders,* 2003, Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

LESSONS LEARNED: JOY AND WENDY

Joy and Wendy eventually sat down to have a hard conversation about the incident. At one point, Wendy asked her principal, "Did you ever think of my feelings when you told that story at the staff meeting?" Joy responded

frankly: "To tell you the truth, Wendy, I never thought about your feelings. I was just speaking my truth." She was surprised that the staff had reacted by defending Wendy. In her words, "I thought I had built trust, but all of a sudden I felt really alienated. *Maybe these people don't trust me,* I thought. *Maybe this is fake congeniality.*"

At the same time, Joy realized that her own emotional distress had made it hard to empathize with Wendy or to anticipate the staff's response. She later shared, "What keeps resonating with me is that I needed to look at the situation from multiple perspectives, and I didn't because it was such a deep, hard, emotional situation." During the conversation, Wendy had her own epiphany after she said out loud to Joy, "I guess I'm color blind to the fact that you're African American. I just see you as a friend." The moment she uttered these words, Wendy realized that she had just unconsciously reinscribed her own bias and privilege as a White woman. In her eagerness to be an ally, she had lost the social context of what the monkey image could mean to a Black woman leader. She had essentially deracialized Joy, effacing critical elements of her identity.

After this talk, the two women spoke to their staff together and emphasized the importance of being professional and open, and maintaining communication with one another. Although they maintained a cordial relationship, their friendship and trust never fully recovered. What did they each learn as leaders who care about equity?

Here are Joy's lessons learned:

Don't let it go. "If somebody makes a comment and you feel uncomfortable, say something. Even if it's just, 'I'm not really comfortable talking about kids like that.'"

Invest in people's cultural competence. Don't shy away when an opportunity presents itself. If a colleague does something culturally insensitive, have the conversation. Invite the person to reflect publicly *with* you on the experience.

Don't fight the power. In the heat of her anger, Joy forgot that her positional power could trigger threat responses in staff. She reflected, "Staff members were uncomfortable when they heard the story because they felt that the 'boss' could possibly 'turn' on them if they made a similar misstep. I may think that all staff members are my friends, but I can't ever forgot that they see me as the 'boss' first."

Here are Wendy's lessons learned:

Take a risk and be vulnerable. "In hindsight, I would have proactively explained to the staff what had happened to open up an important

conversation." Despite how vulnerable she felt, she would have supported her White colleagues to address the issues at hand rather than rally to her defense.

Own your privilege. In hindsight, Wendy recognized that the way the incident played out reinforced her privilege as a White woman and cast *her* as the victim (a phenomenon known as "white fragility," which I'll discuss in the Listening Leader Inquiry section). She would have named this dynamic instead of "taking center stage" in the conversation.

Acknowledge the conditions that make equity conversations difficult. Wendy felt that she and Joy could have named the emotional challenges of equity work: "We're in the context of a highly stressful profession and calling. When you give yourself to the mission of equity, it's a prerequisite to understand that this is a life-and-death situation for some kids. If you don't believe that, you can live in blissful ignorance."

There is so much to mine from Joy and Wendy's story: We need to create resilient adult communities where people have the courage to address incidents of bias, microaggressions, and cultural insensitivity—and still come out the other side. We need to view trust and commitment to equity as fragile resources that leaders must constantly renew. And we need to invest in the equity literacy of our colleagues. It will be hard to do this deep work if we are in the grip of an amygdala hijack, so please practice self-care. Find allies outside of your context to "get real" with—people who will listen to you, validate you, and then ask tough questions that require you to rethink your assumptions or approach.

For Listening Leaders of all backgrounds, there may also be a lesson around the importance of cross-racial alliances. How do we hold each other accountable for missteps without getting tangled in guilt and shame? How do we model for students the need to have courageous conversations alongside the need to acknowledge one another's humanity and imperfection? The National Coalition on Equity in Education writes,

> To make progress on this very complex problem [educational inequity] it will be necessary to improve alliances between educators from different ethnic and racial groups, between males and females, between those with disabilities and those without, and between people of different class backgrounds.[17]

This won't be easy; it is messy, taxing, yet critical work.

At the end of the day, we must remember that impact matters more than intent. Racism and bias infuse the air we all breathe, and we must

hold ourselves and our colleagues accountable for actively filtering this air. Bias can't be cured, but it can be disrupted through listening and by developing layered stories about each other that reflect our full humanity. Listening cracks open the cognitive and emotional space to understand one another.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Without a shared language to address equity issues in our schools, we will undermine the fragile currency of trust and marginalize the experiences and voices of people of color.
- Tuning in to structural racism allows us to see how institutional structures and systems interact to produce racialized outcomes, regardless of the intent of individuals.
- Tuning in to unconscious bias helps us understand that bias is pervasive and destructive and that we can interrupt it with awareness and conscious reconditioning.
- Tuning in to cultural difference allows us to be humble and take a learning stance around the complexity of culture and context.

LISTENING LEADER INQUIRY

Question: What if I engage my team in an equity conversation and people fall apart emotionally?

My thoughts: Emotion is a natural outgrowth of hard conversations about inequity. Listening Leaders create space for people to express emotion; in particular, they don't allow the **tone policing** of people of color who speak up about racial injustice. (Chapter 10 discusses tone policing in the context of group dynamics.) They also pay attention to White fragility—a state in which even a small degree of racial stress feels intolerable to White people and triggers defensive reactions like arguing, silence, or walking out of the room.[a] These behaviors, though likely driven by the emotional brain, serve to maintain Discourse I and restore White racial equilibrium. Although there's no easy "fix" to this dynamic, I would recommend that you focus on building the racial literacy of your team. Read and discuss this chapter and other writing on equity. Use Robin DiAngelo's article to teach the term *White fragility* and bring consciousness to this pattern of behavior. As you build shared language, invite your team to form agreements for how they want to communicate when the conversation gets hard. Chapter 10 includes sample agreements.

Question: I'm the only woman leader on a team of men. I often feel undermined by my male colleagues in ways that are subtle and I think unconscious. What should I do?

My thoughts: As you note, this is a tough situation because of the unconscious nature of the behavior. I would encourage you to identify at least one male ally who you believe will listen to your experience and act as a thought partner. Invite this person into a confidential conversation, share your concerns, and think together about how to address the dynamics. I would also consider asking your team to explore a text that discusses issues of gender bias in the workplace.

Question: I love the idea of shifting the discourse and tuning in to the channels. What advice do you have for someone who is not the positional leader of the entire school? If I am a coach or an AP, how can I influence these conversations without seeming insubordinate?

My thoughts: Great question. Professional learning communities (PLCs) are the optimal spaces in which to engage in these conversations. Ideally, you are in a position to create opportunities for your colleagues to apply the equity channels to dilemmas they face with students and families. For example, have people read and discuss this chapter to build shared language. Next, invite them to share their own experiences around these issues. (Chapter 10 offers meeting routines for this type of work.) Then organize small-group discussions in which people take turns sharing a dilemma while their colleagues each pay attention to one of the channels and pose questions from that angle. The consultancy protocol, or Helping Trios, described in Chapter 10 is a helpful structure for this process.

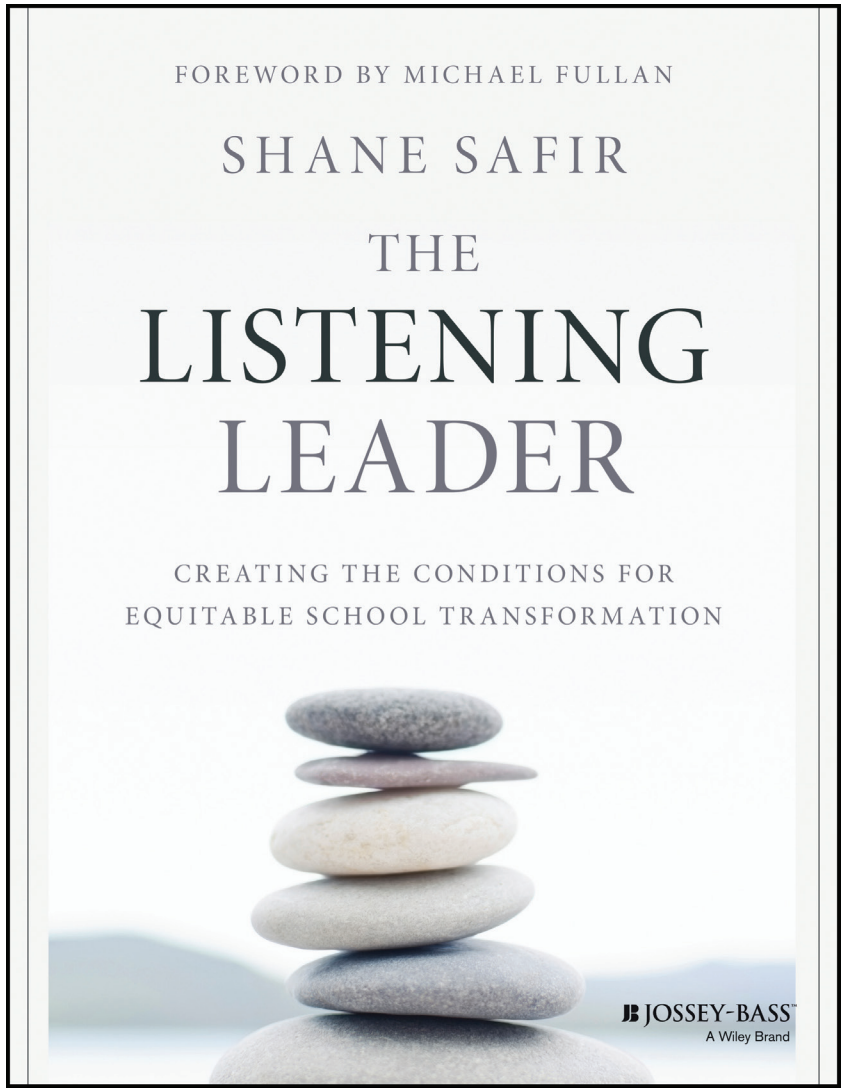
Question: Implicit bias occurs all the time in my school. I want to make sure that I am tuning in and responding to this, but I don't want people to feel like I am "policing" them. How can I hold true to this focus while maintaining an environment in which people don't feel constantly threatened or launched into "flight" mode?

My thoughts: It isn't always on *you* as a leader to interrupt bias. You need a cadre of equity leaders across your organization who begin to form an aligned vision around this work. Consider forming a study group to build the equity literacy of emerging leaders. Read Zaretta Hammond's wonderful book *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain* together or Michelle Alexander's stunning *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness.* Also consider the role of self-reflection in fostering critical consciousness around bias. As you develop common language and knowledge around equity, create opportunities for people to reflect with peers around their own experiences of implicit bias as well as critical incidents in the classroom or staffroom. The next chapter provides prompts for how to approach this, and Chapter 9 offers key steps in an equity-driven change process.

[a] DiAngelo, R. (2011). White fragility. *International Journal of Critical Pedagogy, 3*(3), 54–70.

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