Leading for Equity in Complex Systems
A Transdisciplinary Approach for Thinking, Engaging and Acting Differently

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NEP is developing a transdisciplinary approach to developing equity leaders working in complex systems that is accessible, transportable and effective. We intend to build out and articulate a conceptual framework, service designs, tools and products to support the learning, growth and development of these leaders and the organizations they lead. This project seeks to address questions that include, "How do we believe this can be accomplished?" How do we support and develop leaders who think, engage and act in new ways when addressing problems of policy and practice that are seemingly intractable or complex?

Our Equity Leadership Framework (ELF) provides a frame of reference that provide ways for leaders to be more deliberate and transparent in developing the capacity to engage in a transformational praxis (theory and practice) of purposeful leadership action. The framework is grounded in three disciplines:

Equity: developing equity consciousness (internal and external awareness of systemic oppression and its effects) and commitment (the will to take up equity challenges). This discipline is best represented by our *Leading for Equity* curriculum.

Complexity: understanding the nature of complex systems, distinguishing between complex versus simple or complicated problems, and to developing corresponding leadership approaches that match the actual complexity of equity challenges. This discipline is best represented by our *Leading for Equity in Complex Systems* curriculum.

Design: approaching equity challenges through the mindset of user-centered design, which shifts traditional power dynamics related to decision-making and brings forth deeper innovation and agency amidst institutionalized norms and structures. This discipline is best represented by our emerging *Liberatory Design* curriculum.
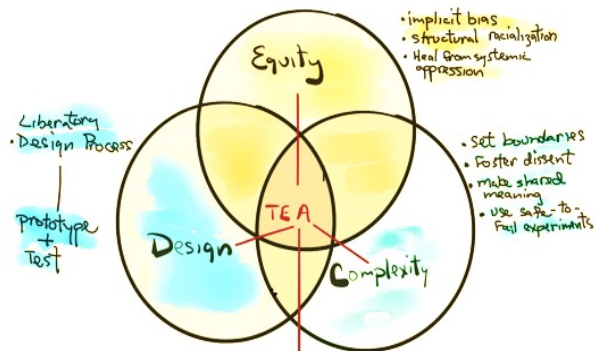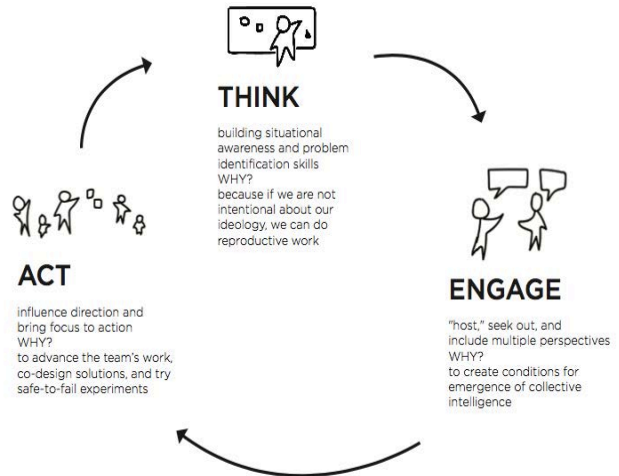
This transdisciplinary approach provide ways to:

Help leaders *think, engage,* and *act* in new ways that can influence and catalyze opportunities that add value particularly for their most underserved children, families, and communities.

At the core, equity leadership is about developing the ability to Think, Engage, and Act differently in order to have a powerful impact on the complex systems in which we lead. Equity leadership is about being self-aware, self-correcting and self- directed and is vital in developing the transformational habits, skills and practices that demonstrate moral courage, independent judgment and bold action for leading in complex systems.

THINK
building situational awareness and problem identification skills
WHY?
because if we are not intentional about our ideology, we can do reproductive work

ENGAGE
"host," seek out, and include multiple perspectives
WHY?
to create conditions for emergence of collective intelligence

ACT
influence direction and bring focus to action
WHY?
to advance the team's work, co-design solutions, and try safe-to-fail experiments

To think, engage and act differently as an equity leader is about increasing one's skill to anticipate, notice and respond to changes in one's environment. The process for unlocking one's innovative potential and increasing one's ability to engage and lead others in addressing inequity is rarely obvious or self evident on finding a way forward.

For instance, it is common for simple or even complicated cause-and- effect explanations to be offered as remedies for the persistent racial inequities that we see across the country in public education. We see these remedies happening in the form of No Child Left Behind, Race to the Top, Common Core Standards and the newly enacted Every Student Succeeds Act. For equity leaders to take action requires, in part, a persuasive framework and language, as well as tools to help identify more effective routes to progress on seemingly intractable societal challenges.

In complex situations, equity leaders must concentrate on the present more than the future, look more toward the possible than the probable, and conduct safe-to-learn experiments to discover what might work. By taking in multiple perspectives, asking different questions, and seeing more of the system within which they work, equity leaders can better understand themselves, their role and the world around them. As they grow, these habits enhance their performance and enable them to navigate the "not knowing" while still setting a direction for the emergence of solutions to address their most

challenging equity issues.

We believe people have the capacity to solve their own problems. Knowing how to solve complicated problems (someone has the answer] is about steps that are pre-planned and predictable, offer proven solutions and is a linear process. In schools, building a master schedule to optimize the opportunity of access and learning for all students is an example of a complicated problem.

But knowing how to solve complex problems (answers will be emergent and can't be know in advance) involve steps that are emergent, include experimentation focused on new solutions and is a cyclic process of inquiry. Implementing the Common Core Standards that ensures all students learn including those furthest from opportunity (African American, Latino, low-income, second language learners) is a complex problem. Equity leadership development is about developing habits, skills and practices that match and are appropriate for addressing complex equity challenges.

Developing a critical equity consciousness of how we think, engage and act is key in leading for equity in complex systems and can help on that journey.

Partial Reading List for Equity Leadership Framework

Below is a partial list of the resources that influenced the theory construction for developing the NEP Equity Leadership Framework. The categories below represent how the underlying theory represent the cross disciplinary nature of this framework.

Critical Theory
- Paulo Freire – Pedagogy of the Oppressed
- Eugene Eubanks, Ralph Parish, and Dianne Smith – "Changing the Discourse in Schools"
- Stephen Brookfield – The Power of Critical Theory: Liberating Adult Learning and Teaching

Equity and Social Justice Ideology
- Paulo Freire – Pedagogy of the Oppressed
- john powell – Racing Towards Justice
- john powell – "Toward a Structural Racism Framework"
- john powell – " Post Racialism or Targeted Universalism"

Whole Person (transformative) Adult Learning
- Paulo Freire – Pedagogy of the Oppressed
- Myles Horton and Paulo Freire – We Make the Road by Walking
- John Heron – Feeling and Personhood; Complete Facilitator's Handbook
- Robert Kegan and Lisa Lahey – Immunity to Change

Leadership in CAOS (Complex Adaptive Oppressive Systems)
- Margaret Wheatley – "Leadership in the Age of Complexity"
- Dave Snowden and Mary Boone – "Leader's Framework for Decision-making"
- Mary Uhl-Bien & Russ Marion – Complexity leadership: Conceptual Foundations
- Jennifer Berger and Keith Johnston – Simple Habits for Complex Times: Powerful Practices for Leaders
- Margaret Wheatley – Leadership and the New Science
- C. Otto Scharmer – Theory U: Leading from the Future as it Emerges
- Ronald Heifetz – The Practice of Adaptive Leadership
- Chris Rogers – Informal Coalitions
- Richard Knowles – The Leadership Dance

Science of Complexity
- Dave Snowden – "Origins of Cynefin"
- Ralph Stacey – Complex Responsive Processes in Organizations
- Donella Meadows – Thinking in Systems

Neuroscience
- Perception Institute (various authors) – Science of Equality, vol. 1
- David Rock - *"SCARF: A brain-based model for collaborating with and influencing others"*

Experience of the National Equity Project
- NEP Coaching Model