

**Table 2.1** The four abilities of equity literacy

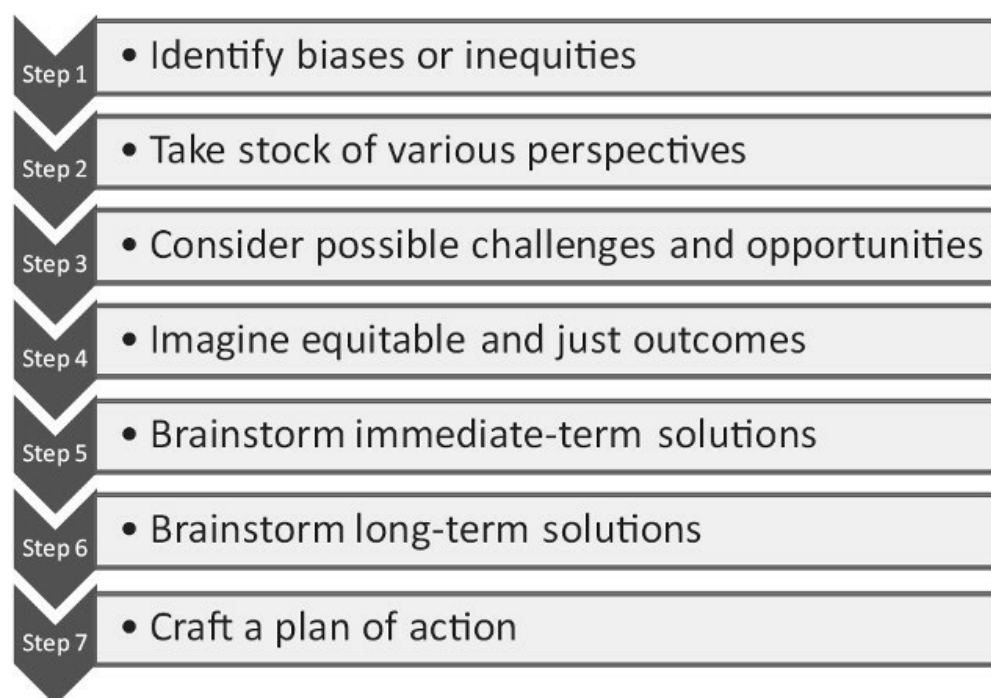
EQUITY LITERACY ABILITIES	EXAMPLES OF ASSOCIATED SKILLS AND DISPOSITIONS
Ability to <i>recognize</i> even the subtlest biases and inequities	Equity literate educators: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• notice even subtle bias in classroom materials, classroom interactions, and school policies; and</li><li>• reject deficit views that locate the sources of outcome inequalities (such as test score or graduate rate disparities) as existing within students’ “mindsets” or “cultures” rather than as resulting from disparate levels of access to resources and experiences in and out of school.</li></ul>
Ability to <i>respond to</i> biases and inequities in the immediate term	Equity literate educators: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• have the facilitation skills and content knowledge needed to intervene effectively when biases or inequities, such as gender bias or sexism, arise in classrooms, faculty meetings, or other contexts; and</li><li>• foster conversations with colleagues about bias and inequity concerns at their schools.</li></ul>
Ability to <i>redress</i> biases and inequities in the long term	Equity literate educators: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• advocate against inequitable school practices, such as racially or economically biased tracking, and advocate for equitable school practices; and</li><li>• identify ways to mitigate structural barriers—lack of access to preventive healthcare, for example—that impede educational engagement by replacing school or classroom practices that exacerbate these barriers with practices designed to weaken their impact.</li></ul>
Ability to <i>create and sustain</i> a bias-free and equitable learning environment	Equity literate educators: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• express high expectations for all students through higher-order pedagogies and curricula; and</li><li>• demonstrate a willingness to withstand complaints about changes meant to redistribute educational access and opportunity more equitably.</li></ul>

Source: Adapted from Paul Gorski’s *Reaching and Teaching Students in Poverty: Strategies for Erasing the Opportunity Gap* (forthcoming in 2018)

## [Case Analysis: An Equity Literacy Process](#)

Our process for analyzing educational cases, assembled to strengthen in educators the four abilities of equity literacy, is comprised of seven steps, summarized in [Figure 2.1](#). The steps are accumulative, designed to prepare us to develop informed, mindful responses to multilayered classroom and school scenarios. They move us through a process of peeling away layers of the proverbial onion, never settling for quick, simple responses that rely too heavily on our predispositions or presuppositions.

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**Figure 2.1** Seven steps in the equity literacy case analysis approach

In what follows we describe each of the seven steps of the equity literacy case analysis process. Hoping to demonstrate the process in action, we apply the steps to the scenario at South Dovetown Middle School described in [Chapter 1](#). (An abbreviated, printable version of the process can be found in [Appendix A](#).)

As you will see, the case analysis process is not designed to guide you toward a *correct* set of strategies for responding to and redressing the conditions at Dovetown or

described in the other cases. Hand this process and any of these cases to ten teachers or school administrators and chances are they will produce ten different action plans. Instead, we designed the process to help you practice using your unique insights, your knowledge about students and their families, and your expertise with school and classroom dynamics in order to respond, as effectively and equitably as possible, to the types of biases and inequities that inevitably crop up in schools. But we also designed it to infuse your insights, knowledge, and expertise with equity literacy. It is more an art than a science; more a willingness to dig, and dig, and dig deeply than an ability to calculate quickly.

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This also is why, humbled by our own limitations, we encourage you to analyze the cases in groups whenever possible. Almost as important as reflecting upon our unique individual analyses of each case is reflecting upon why people with different combinations of identities and life experiences might interpret the cases differently.

### *Step 1: Identify Biases or Inequities Posed by the Case*

Many biases and inequities students face in school are implicit and unintentional, hidden in day-to-day practices, school traditions, and quiet interactions. It can be especially difficult to recognize the sorts of challenges students or families face when we have never faced those challenges ourselves. If you have never been the target of racism and xenophobia or watched a public figure encourage prejudice against people in your family or community, it might be difficult to understand Ms. Samaya's sense of urgency for the school to respond explicitly to the aftermath of the election. So we urge you during Step 1 to read between the lines. Practice *recognizing* conditions and contexts you might not usually recognize or seeing what you might be conditioned not to see.

Begin by naming biases, inequities, or otherwise troublesome conditions that are immediately apparent to you. For some readers, perhaps it is apparent and troublesome that at least one teacher, Ms. Allister, is minimizing biased or prejudiced views as "free speech" without considering that, free as it might be, prejudiced language and ideas still have an impact on her students. She also appears resentful of the growing population of

Somali and Central American immigrants at the school. Is it possible her resentment is affecting her engagement with these students and their families? Can she feel this resentment and also demonstrate high expectations for them? What are the chances several other teachers feel the same as Ms. Allister but aren't saying so?

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Once you have a grasp of the more surface-level dynamics, dig deeper. Look for less explicit, not-so-obvious examples of existing or potential bias, inequity, stereotypes, or presumptions. What does the case tell us about school or classroom policy, about instructional or leadership practices, about individuals' attitudes and perspectives that might hint at something deeper than surface-level biases and inequities? Consider, for example, what some readers might interpret as Principal Smith's dismissive tone regarding Ms. Samaya's concerns, or his failure to address the issue without Ms. Samaya's prompting. We might also scrutinize his decision to respond to a string of bias incidents only with anti-bullying training when the incidents reflect not just the acts of isolated bullies, but growing sentiments in the community.

Remember, there are no right or wrong answers here—no single “problem” that everybody should identify. Different people will identify different problems, and that's fine. In fact, it's an opportunity for us to learn from one another what we tend to see and what we might tend to miss.

### *Step 2: Take Stock of Varying Perspectives*

Our case has at least a couple of obvious stakeholders who might have different perspectives on what is happening. Most obvious, perhaps, are the people directly involved in the exchange: Ms. Samaya, Ms. Allister, and Principal Smith. In the most immediate term, we might note that our colleague, Ms. Samaya, has probably been hurt by both the principal's inaction and Ms. Allister's comments. We might try to put ourselves in her shoes and consider how she could be experiencing the interaction.

But we shouldn't stop there. Ms. Samaya might be the only person who spoke up, but that doesn't necessarily mean she's the only person present at the meeting who could be concerned about the principal's silence or Ms. Allister's comments. In every case we

should consider, not only the people immediately involved, but also those within earshot and eyeshot. Even those present who were not offended by Ms. Allister's comments or who agreed with Ms. Allister's assessment of the situation have a stake in the outcome. What happens next will send a message to *everybody* in the room about what Principal Smith values. Even if his next move simply confirms some people's existing ideas instead of challenging them, that's significant enough to note.

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Complicating matters, despite being at the center of the scenario, the people attending the meeting are not the only people with a stake in the outcome. The Somali and Central American students and their families have perspectives. Is the school going to reproduce the conditions they experience in the community or challenge those conditions? The school's decision whether to respond explicitly or not will affect the entire community. Moreover, even if Principal Smith eventually chooses against institutional silence and supports a public statement, students carry what they experience outside school into schools and classrooms. As educators who value equity and justice, we have to be responsive to what students carry into school with them even if we do not have the power to eliminate every structural barrier they experience outside schools.

Again, dig deeply. The idea is to challenge our own thinking. For example, this is an important consideration: although the principal believes making a public statement will throw the school into the political fray, it's also true that deciding not to respond is *just as political* an act as responding. Silence has as much impact as outspokenness. Who would be impacted most by the silence?

We encourage you to seek balance between focusing only on the most obvious stakeholders and broadening your focus so much that the discussion becomes unwieldy. Start with the immediate participants and then, at the very least, the ring of constituents around them. Focus both on marginalized communities and privileged communities.

We realize this step requires speculating. There is no real way for us to know what somebody else's perspective is. We can, however, challenge ourselves to try to see the incident through a variety of lenses.

### *Step 3: Consider Possible Challenges and Opportunities*

Given the varied perspectives explored in Step 2, our next task is to identify potential challenges and opportunities presented by the situation. Start with the individuals involved. Ms. Samaya has already identified an opportunity. Dovetown can choose to make a positive, equity-informed statement letting families who might be experiencing bias know they are welcome at the school. There's a more general opportunity for every educator at Dovetown to learn more about the challenges and barriers with which their students contend, to learn about how forms of racism and xenophobia that exist outside school often are replicated inside school. These are lessons they can apply to other students who might experience bias and inequity, such as low-income students or lesbian, gay, or bisexual students, or transgender students. Certainly in the immediate term an opportunity has arisen to help Ms. Allister develop more equitable beliefs about a significant proportion of her students.

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Of course, the scenario also presents several challenges we need to consider as we work toward solutions. Ms. Allister's views present a significant challenge, along with the probability that she is not alone in her biased beliefs. Another challenge might revolve around finding ways to respond constructively to student bias and bigotry when that bias and bigotry likely have been taught at home. Principal Smith's apparent aversion to controversy and resulting willingness to prioritize the comfort of families who voted for Mayor Barton over the comfort and safety of students whose families are the targets of bias and injustice, also presents a challenge because he has the most power at the school.

Moving further into the messiness, even if Principal Smith is missing the equity mark in this regard, his concern over the politics of the situation can be insightful. Certainly we must consider how supporters of Mayor Barton might react if the school responds more boldly than offering anti-bullying professional development. The school *should* do something more and *should* prepare itself for possible fallout. We will need to consider that preparation in Steps 5, 6, and 7.

Remember to use your analysis from Steps 1 and 2 to inform your assessment of challenges and opportunities. In later steps the goal will be to *respond to* and *redress* the equity problems posed by cases while also taking optimal advantage of the opportunities the cases present for individual and institutional growth.

#### *Step 4: Imagine Equitable Outcomes*

Building on the contextual understandings we have gained by taking stock of stakeholders' perspectives and considering possible challenges and opportunities, we begin imagining positive and equitable outcomes. This is a critical step, as Steps 5 through 7 are designed to filter all the thinking and analyzing we have done so far into solutions meant to reach the outcomes we imagine in Step 4.

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A few guiding principles can be helpful as we imagine what we hope to achieve by resolving the cases in this book. First, it's important to distinguish *equitable* outcomes from *equal* outcomes. As we see it, equality connotes *sameness*. Equity, on the other hand, connotes *fairness*, a redistribution of access and opportunity, including access to a bias-free, supportive, actively anti-racist, anti-sexist, anti-heterosexist, anti-transphobic, anti-ableist, anti-every-other-oppression educational experience. Equity takes context into account. The equality-minded educator might think, hey, we need to value all children all the time, so responding so directly to Mayor Barton's election and its aftermath sends the wrong message that we care more about immigrant students than other students. All students experience barriers, they might say, so why focus so much on one or two specific groups and their challenges? The equity-literate educator might acknowledge, yes, all students experience barriers, but all students don't experience racism and xenophobia on top of the other barriers. We have to redistribute energies and resources to address a form of injustice harming a particular group of students especially harshly right now. Sometimes equity is unequal. And vice versa.

Secondly, remember to think both *immediate term* and *long term*. What can be resolved right now, on the spot, and what will equity look like once it is resolved? Imagine yourself in the room with the Dovetown staff. How would you intervene in the

moment? Would you challenge Principal Smith on the “politics” justification for refusing Ms. Samaya’s suggestion? Would you invite your colleagues into a conversation about what might be useful beyond anti-bullying training? How might you respond to Ms. Allister?

Consider long-term outcomes, as well. Perhaps an equitable outcome would include anti-racism and anti-xenophobic professional development on top of the anti-bullying training for everybody at Dovetown, including Principal Smith. It might also include a set of policy initiatives to guide how to respond to future situations similar to the one in which the school is currently embroiled.

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Finally, *be specific*. Identify very specific, on-the-ground outcomes. How, specifically, will things be different in the school or classroom if we commit to resolving the issue and all its nuances equitably?

#### *Step 5: Brainstorm Immediate-Term Responses*

Now that you have some equitable outcomes in mind, we begin brainstorming strategies to get us there. What are some of the things we might do *right now* to achieve those outcomes if we were educators at Dovetown? This is a brainstorm, remember, so don’t overthink. Focus on using the understandings that you’ve developed in Steps 1 through 4 and, of course, your own experience and expertise, and make a list. You’ll have an opportunity in Step 7 to refine your ideas into a formal action plan.

#### *Step 6: Brainstorm Longer-Term Policy and Practice Adjustments*

In Step 6 we develop longer-term strategies, often for more substantive change. This is where we might brainstorm ways to bolster awareness about the sorts of challenges the Somali and Central American students experience in and out of school. It is where we focus on shifting institutional culture and knowledge, infusing equity into school-wide policies and practices or even district policies and practices, if we believe they need to be altered to achieve our equitable outcomes.



Here, again, we're brainstorming. Try not to self-censor. Record whatever ideas come to mind based on Steps 1 through 5.

### *Step 7: Craft a Plan of Action*

During the final step we craft our brainstorms into specific actions we believe will result in the equitable outcomes we outlined in Step 5. What would we do in the immediate term? What would we do that might be a little longer-term equity project? How would we respond to ensure, to the best of our knowledge and power, justice for everybody involved?

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## **A Few Final Thoughts**

We recognize that in the heat of the moment we do not have time to sit down and think through the seven steps of a case analysis process. The point is not to memorize these steps or to step through them carefully at every instance of inequity.

Instead, the idea is to use them to practice our equity literacy skills by reflecting on classroom and school conditions through a social justice lens. Use them to practice grappling with the nuances and complexities inherent in any institution full of people with different aspirations and gifts and challenges in a society full of bias and injustice. For additional guidance refer to the “Points for Consideration” for each case in [Appendix B](#). These points offer valuable insight we might otherwise miss when analyzing a case.

Practice enough and that equity view will become second nature. We begin to see the nuances and complexities previously invisible, or at least a little hazy, to us. That is how we cultivate equity literacy—how we become a threat to the existence of bias and inequity in our spheres of influence.