

# Moving Beyond the Fence: Interrogating Problematic Images of Equity and Envisioning Inspiring Metaphors

Kelsey Quaisley  
Oregon State University

Wendy Smith  
University of Nebraska-Lincoln

Leilani Pai  
Denison University

Matthew Voigt  
Michigan State University

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Visual imagery and metaphors are powerful. A single image can represent multitudinous and complex conceptualizations of an idea, and evoke emotions tied to a viewer's deep-rooted values, beliefs, and experiences (e.g., Adiredja & Zandieh, 2020). Unpacking this complexity is especially valuable in critical equity work (Levinson et al., 2022). Drawing on our research team's engagement with research-practice partnerships in three networked improvement communities (NICs) in mathematics departments, we are motivated by the following research questions: 1) How do NIC members respond when asked to draw or share an image representing equity work? 2) What emotions are evoked when reacting to these representations for researchers engaged in research-practice partnerships?

We compiled images from NIC members' journals (see Figure 1 for the prompt, left) and subsequently asked each research team member to describe the emotion or word that was evoked upon viewing the image. We first categorized the types of images by how each was created, content (e.g., reflecting the status quo or an aspirational future), and composition. We further categorized the researchers' emotional responses as positive (e.g., curiosity, appreciation, hopefulness) or negative (e.g., disgust, confusion, helplessness), noting how the composition and content of the images evoked our emotions. In many spaces in mathematics education, there is a common scene (or variant of it) used to distinguish equity from equality, which we refer to as *the fence* (see Figure 1, center image; Froehle, 2016). Members from all three NICs submitted images of the fence or a similar variant, e.g., picking apples, comprising 9 of the 20 images submitted. While the fence can be a useful tool for discussion, it is problematic in that it portrays the people as the problem (Equity in Education Coalition, 2018), rather than systemic structures.

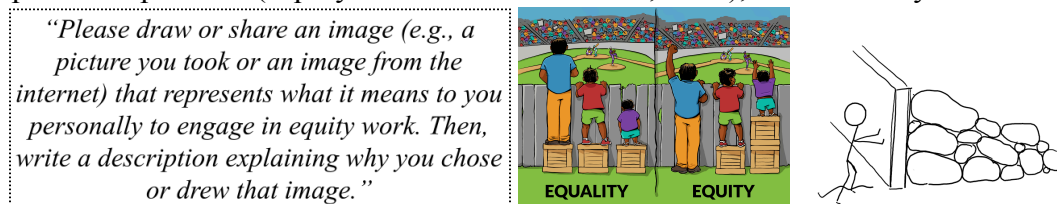


Figure 1. The journal prompt that elicited images (left), the Fence (center), and an Immovable Wall (right)

As a result, repeated images of the fence brought about emotions of irritation and frustration among the research team. We are ready to move beyond the fence. More positive emotions were evoked by other images that NIC members included, such as an immovable wall (see Figure 1, right image), a collage of kites cycling through soaring and crashing, and searching a cave with a flashlight. We found these images to more sincerely convey the tensions, joys, and challenges of doing critical equity work. For our poster, we present a collection of types of images and researcher responses in more detail, and suggest other visual representations of equity as inspiring and creative alternatives to the fence.

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