

The Evolving Language of Equity

by Wendie Wilson, Executive Staff Officer, BIPOC Engagement and Advocacy

Language is the cornerstone of culture. It has the power to define us as individuals within and outside community. Language can also be limiting in terms of opportunities to authentically self-identify and express our true selves.

Currently, institutions, organizations and programs are using the term equity-deserving to identify people belonging to the following groups: Indigenous, Black, racialized people, people with disabilities, women and people belonging to the 2SLGBTQ+ community. This term equity-deserving has recently evolved from the previous language of equity-seeking.

Equity-seeking was deemed to be problematic for some members of the aforementioned groups, as it implies members of these groups are seeking acceptance as equals by those in positions of power, as if this is not already naturally implied by default of being human. It also puts the onus on people from these groups to be the only ones seeking equity. Shouldn't everyone be included in the quest of seeking equity, especially those positioned in power?

The ever-evolving language used in the pursuit of equity and the transition from equity-seeking to equity-deserving has been deemed a better fit, as everyone is deserving of equity. Essentially, we are focusing on and referring to those who have been historically left out of conversations, policy and programming or whose voices have not been heard or even recognized at many tables.

For the most part equity and equity-deserving is the language currently being used throughout Canada to describe these groups but I foresee this terminology changing as our sense of language, understanding and sense of authentic identity evolves and expands.

I recently spent some time in Ottawa at the National Indigenous Education and Reconciliation Network Gathering (NIERNNG). This was a gathering of some of the leading minds in Canadian education. I was fortunate and honoured to have been included. Besides the host organization (Royal Canadian Geographic Society) staff member, I was the only other Black individual in attendance. The agenda was solely and unapologetically focused on Indigenous education and the majority of presenters were from either First Nations, Metis or Inuit communities. There were considerations I was not aware of before attending the gathering and it put some vital concepts in perspective for me.

One of those thoughts was my loss for a concise descriptor or specific language that might be used to accurately identify individuals belonging to underrepresented groups. To be honest I struggled to capture the language that would do justice for those trying to obtain equity within

the system until I heard the conversation around sovereignty by Indigenous leaders at the gathering. Sovereignty lends itself to distinct groups building and maintaining their own tables specifically aligned and self-governed for both preservation and advancement that excludes the fight against racial and other discriminatory inequities.

The fight for equality is exactly that, a fight, a struggle, an uphill battle. Is sovereignty the answer? Can we have more than one table? Is there a place for groups to be self-determining/governing while still being part of the larger conversation? Is there opportunity to use our energy to build alongside others who share a similar agenda instead of fighting to be on the agenda? These are all just questions for now and things to be considered.

In my new role as Executive Staff Officer BIPOC Engagement and Advocacy I will be working towards building capacity for members to authentically self-identify in order to create and enhance initiatives, programs and services within the NSTU. I will focus on engaging members and providing space and voice for those underrepresented groups whose voices have been historically absent or minimized. Most importantly, I want to start an honest conversation around what is missing and what is needed to create meaningful systematic change.

Members belonging to "equity-deserving" groups will be given opportunities to identify what types of barriers prevent them from becoming involved in the work of the NSTU. This outreach work will begin in the fall with hopes of increasing the voices and volume of those often underrepresented and to continue the discussion on what equity really means and what it looks and feels like.