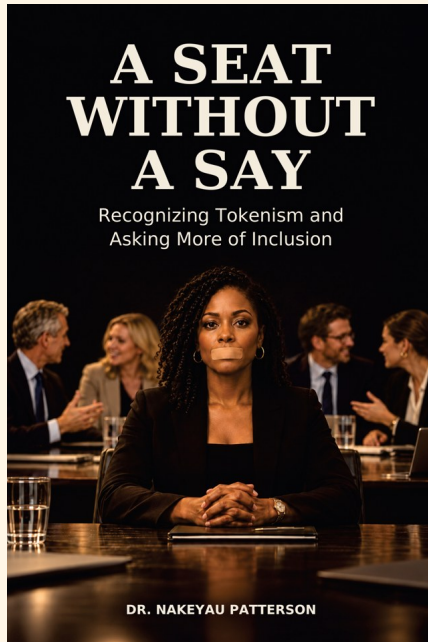


RootED Equity

FREE READING PREVIEW

A Seat Without a Say

Recognizing Tokenism and Asking More of Inclusion



Dr. Nakeyau Patterson

A note on the examples, contents, and Chapter 1: You Are in the Picture.

Selected pages from the published book.
Original book pagination is retained.

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A note on the examples

Adrienne and the school committee are fictional. Her recurring story follows an invitation after approval, an inaccurate public description, requests for change, and a later review assignment. The chair organizes committee work, the principal receives Adrienne's concern, and a district administrator decides on the procedure and resources. Passages introduced with imagine, suppose, or a contrasting version explore alternative responses; they do not establish that those responses occurred in the ongoing story. Research accounts are attributed separately.

The practical questions and worksheets are the author's proposed reflection tools, not validated diagnostic scales.

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CHAPTER 1

You Are in the Picture

Adrienne saw the photograph before she read the announcement.

Eight people stood outside the school entrance. She was near the center, wearing the blue jacket she had chosen that morning because she wanted to look prepared. The caption described a committee working together to improve how families received support.

In her classroom, Adrienne had watched a parent explain the same concern to several people without learning who could resolve it. She brought questions about the proposed process, expecting to discuss them with colleagues who could help find answers.

At the committee meeting, the procedure was already approved. Members were asked to review the announcement.

Now the announcement described them as partners in developing the process.

Adrienne enlarged the photograph. She was the only Black person in it.

She could not know what every reader would assume. But she knew what she had been allowed to do, and it was less than the announcement suggested.

She closed the image, opened her notes, and looked again at the questions she had brought to the meeting. They were still unanswered.

Adrienne, the school, and the committee are fictional. Their story will return throughout this book so we can follow an invitation, a contribution, and an outcome without mistaking an invented scene for testimony. The events give us something specific to examine: what the role promised, what it permitted, and what the institution later claimed.

The photograph was not the entire problem. It made the gap visible.

An invitation can mean several things

You may recognize the feeling of being pleased to receive an invitation and uncertain about what follows. A committee, a leadership

program, a panel, a new position, or a request to mentor colleagues can open a useful opportunity. It can also carry expectations that were never explained.

Perhaps you were asked for an opinion after the choice had been made. Perhaps you had access to senior leaders during a public event but no route to them when the work required a decision. Perhaps your name appeared in a project summary while your recommendation went unmentioned.

The invitation may still have had value. You might have met a helpful colleague, contributed to a useful conversation, or gained information you needed. Those benefits can coexist with a serious limit on the role.

Recognizing the limit does not require pretending that nothing good happened. It requires asking what the organization said your participation meant and whether the conditions supported that meaning.

An advisory role, for example, can offer real influence without a vote. It can help a decision-maker see a problem, consider alternatives, or revise a plan. But someone should receive the advice, consider it, and explain what happens next. If the organization instead wants help presenting a settled choice, the invitation should say so.

A role becomes difficult to assess when its language promises partnership while its arrangements permit only presence.

Your qualifications are not the question

The word token can land painfully. It can sound as though the person in the room is less capable, less deserving, or present only because of an identity. This book does not use tokenization to diminish anyone's qualifications.

A skilled professional can be tokenized. So can someone whose expertise the institution genuinely needs. The question concerns how the institution treats the person and uses their participation.

In Adrienne's case, the school may have valued her teaching experience. That would not excuse describing her as a partner in a decision she had no opportunity to shape. Her qualifications and the limits placed on her contribution are separate matters.

The distinction matters when you begin questioning your own experience. You may find yourself reviewing your credentials, rehearsing your accomplishments, or wondering whether a more polished comment would have changed the meeting. Those questions cannot explain why you received a draft after approval or why your name was attached to work you did not perform.

You can prepare carefully and still encounter a role designed with too little influence. You can also make a mistake without losing the right to fair treatment. A useful examination of the institution should not depend on establishing that the affected person has always performed perfectly.

Being the only person who shares an identity does not, by itself, establish tokenism. Neither does having a recommendation declined. Chapter 2 will examine those distinctions closely. Here, we begin with the conditions that make participation consequential.

What happens to the contribution?

Imagine two Black professionals invited to different committees. Each is the only Black member. Neither recommendation is adopted in full.

In the first committee, the member receives relevant information before the meeting. The group considers the recommendation, explains a competing constraint, and adjusts part of the plan in response to the concern. The member's disagreement remains accurately recorded. The committee does not claim unanimous support.

In the second, the member receives the document after the main decision has been made. The chair asks for personal examples but offers no way to alter the process. When the member questions the arrangement, the concern is dismissed. The final announcement presents the member's presence as evidence of broad agreement.

These are hypothetical examples. They show why the outcome of one recommendation cannot answer the whole question. We need to examine access, consideration, support, disagreement, and the account the institution gives of its work.

Meaningful participation does not mean that your preferred option always wins. It means the process can respond to what you contribute, and you can find out how it did so.

Sometimes the response is a revision. Sometimes it is a well-supported explanation for declining a proposal. Sometimes it reveals that a different decision-maker needs to reconsider the matter. In each case, the contribution has somewhere to go.

When the only outcome is another request for your presence, the institution has more to explain.

Five questions to carry through the book

This book returns to five questions. They are an organizing approach for examining participation, not a diagnostic scale or a way to infer motives from a score.

Access: Did you enter early enough, with enough information, to contribute to the relevant choice?

Influence: Who considered your contribution, and what happened because it was considered? If it was declined, what explanation followed?

Resources: Did the assignment include the time, information, support, and compensation appropriate to the work?

Dissent: Could you question the approach without your identity being used to discount the concern or your standing in the role?

Accountability: Who was responsible for the response, by when, and how could anyone check what happened?

These questions connect to one another. Earlier access may accomplish little if the group lacks authority to act. A useful recommendation may remain unimplemented without resources. A formal opportunity to disagree may be difficult to use if the organization treats the disagreement as evidence that you do not belong.

You do not need to answer every question immediately. “I do not know who decides” is information worth keeping. It identifies what needs clarification rather than requiring you to fill the gap with a guess.

The questions also belong to leaders. People accepting an invitation should not have to discover the role's authority and workload through repeated disappointments. Much of this information can be provided before they agree to serve.

Why this book centers Black professionals and educators

The central reader of this book is a Black professional or educator trying to understand a gap between visible inclusion and consequential participation. The institutional questions matter across many settings, but Black experience should not disappear into a general discussion of difference.

Consider what Adrienne was actually invited to contribute. Was the school seeking her experience as a teacher? Her knowledge of the support process? Her perspective as a Black professional? Those purposes may overlap, but they should not be treated as interchangeable.

An institution can welcome relevant perspectives without assigning one person responsibility for explaining an entire racial group. Adrienne can discuss what she has observed and what she knows. She cannot supply the views of every Black family, and she should not be asked to certify a process as fair on their behalf.

Nor should her presence permit leaders to stop asking who else needs to be heard. Families using the procedure may have information the committee lacks. A Black teacher's participation cannot replace their opportunity to contribute.

We will examine group-representative expectations, scrutiny, dissent, and public recognition in later chapters. Each requires careful attention to what happened and to evidence beyond a fictional example. Experiences of other marginalized groups can deepen the discussion when they are properly sourced, but they should not be assumed to operate identically.

You can name a limit without knowing the motive

Adrienne does not know why the chair invited her when the procedure was already approved. Perhaps the chair misunderstood the committee's mandate. Perhaps the school wanted a photograph that

conveyed broad support. Perhaps several decisions combined to produce the gap without anyone describing that goal openly.

She can distinguish those possibilities from what she knows: when the invitation arrived, what the meeting allowed, which questions remained unanswered, and what the announcement claimed.

That distinction gives the concern precision. “The announcement describes us as developing the procedure, but we reviewed communication after approval” identifies something the organization can check and correct.

It does not settle every question about why the arrangement occurred. It does not have to.

At the same time, an institution should not require proof of a private motive before examining a visible problem. A misleading statement remains misleading even if someone meant well. A recommendation with no response route still needs a destination. An assignment without adequate time still needs a workable plan.

You may later find a repeated pattern or a difference in how colleagues were treated. You may also find information that changes your first interpretation. Keeping observable events separate from explanations allows that evidence to matter.

An accurate account can include your reaction and a considered conclusion. Separating evidence from interpretation helps explain both.

The cost of another invitation

Accepting a role may involve more than attending a meeting. It may mean preparation after work, difficult conversations, requests to share personal experiences, or public association with a decision you cannot control.

You are allowed to ask what those demands serve before accepting them. You can request a written description of the role. You can ask which decisions remain open. You can ask how additional work will fit with existing responsibilities.

If you are already in the role, clarification may still help: “Before I prepare the next recommendation, can we confirm who will review it and when we will receive a response?”

That question does not guarantee a fair answer. Some readers will decide a direct request is workable; others will prefer a private conversation, support from a colleague, a narrower assignment, or stepping back. The available choices depend on circumstances the book cannot decide for you.

You do not need to disclose a painful experience to justify an ordinary question about authority or workload. You also do not need to keep accepting roles to prove that you care about inclusion.

For leaders, the responsibility is to make the role useful and honest. Appreciation should accompany accurate expectations, resources, and follow-through. A person who needs those conditions is asking about the work the institution invited them to do.

Start with one invitation

Before moving to the next chapter, choose one invitation or assignment you want to understand. It can be recent, ongoing, or one you are considering. You do not need to begin with the most painful experience.

Write three short accounts.

The invitation: What were you asked to do, and what did the organization say your participation would mean?

The contribution: What did you actually provide, or what are you expected to provide? Note any information, authority, or support you need to do that work.

The outcome: What changed, what explanation followed, or what is still awaiting a response? If the work has not begun, record what you need clarified before it does.

Keep the wording concrete. “I received the draft after approval” is more useful here than “They never listen.” You can separately record your interpretation and the effect on you. Leave unknowns visible.

This short account is a starting point, not a verdict. In later chapters, we will trace decisions, examine repeated patterns, consider options, and identify what the institution must change.

For a leader reading alongside a colleague, make your own account of the same role before asking the colleague to explain it. Compare what the assignment promised with the authority and support you provided. A disagreement between those accounts may identify a question your invitation never answered.

Look beyond the frame

Adrienne wanted families to encounter a better process. She did not accept the invitation simply to appear in a photograph. The image became troubling because it suggested a contribution the role had not permitted.

This book asks you to look beyond that frame: to the information supplied, the choices still open, the work assigned, the response to disagreement, and the result that follows.

You may find that a role offers more influence than you first understood. You may find an honest limit that needs clearer wording. You may find an arrangement that repeatedly asks for your visibility while denying the conditions your contribution requires.

Each finding calls for its own response. None changes your worth.

You are in the picture. The next question is what you were permitted to shape.

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A Seat Without a Say

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