Equity Literacy FOR ALL

Schools can commit to a more robust multiculturalism by putting equity, rather than culture, at the center of the diversity conversation.

Paul C. Gorski and Katy Swalwell

I feel like a visitor in my own school—that hasn't changed," Samantha said, confusion and despair in her voice. We were at the tail end of a focus group discussion with African American students at Green Hills High, a predominantly white, economically diverse school. We had been invited to conduct an equity assessment, examining the extent to which Green Hills was an equitable learning environment for all. We had asked Samantha and a small group of her classmates how they would characterize their school's two-year-old Multicultural Curriculum Initiative, touted by school administrators as a comprehensive effort to infuse a multicultural perspective into all aspects of school life.

"I'm invisible," Sean added, "but also *hyper*visible. Maybe twice a year there's a program about somebody's food or music, but that's about it. I don't see the purpose."

Then Cynthia, who had remained quiet through most of the hourlong discussion, slammed her fist on the table, exclaiming, "That multicultural initiative means nothing. There's racism at this school, and nobody's doing anything about it!"

We found ourselves only a few moments later in our next scheduled focus group, surrounded by the school's power brokers: the principal, assistant principals, deans, and department chairs. Still taken—maybe even a little *shaken*—by what we had heard from the young women and men who felt fairly powerless at Green Hills, we asked the administrators about the purpose of the Multicultural Curriculum Initiative.

After a brief silence, Jonathan, the principal, leaned back in his chair. We had observed him over the past few days interacting with students, and it was clear he cared deeply about them. The Multicultural Curriculum Initiative was his brainchild, his baby. Jonathan decorated his office door with quotes about diversity and his office walls with artwork depicting diverse groups of youth. "We see diversity as our greatest asset. That's what this initiative is all about. What we aim to do here," he explained with measured intensity, "is to celebrate the joys of diversity." When we shared with Jonathan the concerns raised by the African American students, he appeared confused and genuinely concerned. "They said *that*?" he asked, before interrupting a member of his leadership team who had begun to defend the initiative. "Maybe it's time to rethink this."

Beyond Artwork and Celebrations

If we've learned anything working with schools across the United States, it's this: When it comes to education equity, the trouble is not a lack of



multicultural programs or diversity initiatives in schools. Nor is it necessarily a lack of educators who, like Jonathan, appreciate and even champion diversity. In virtually every school we visit, we see attempts at multiculturalism: corridors lined with flags, student-designed posters representing the national or ethnic origins of families in the community, anti-bullying programs, or faculty positions like "Diversity Director."

The trouble lies in how so many diversity initiatives avoid or whitewash serious *equity* issues. It lies in the space between what marginalized students like Cynthia say their schools need to do to help them feel less marginalized and what many of the adults in those schools are comfortable doing in the name of multiculturalism.

To better grasp this, put yourself in Cynthia's shoes. Imagine a world in which, as a result of something over which you have no control—say, your racial identity, sexual orientation, or home language—you're made to feel alienated or invisible at school. Imagine that when you occasionally see little shimmers of yourself reflected in the curriculum, your identity or culture is reduced to a stereotype—to a sari, taco, or polka. Imagine the

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glimmer of excitement you might feel about the possibility that, when the teacher mentions Martin Luther King Jr., a real conversation about racism or poverty might ensue, only to find that even he has been sanitized down to *I have a dream*. Imagine experiencing racism, sexism, or class inequality in the present while hearing about it in school only in the past tense.

What would it feel like, given those circumstances, to be pressed into participating in celebrations of diversity while nobody tends to your alienation? That's what many schools' diversity efforts feel like for students of color, low-income students, English language learners, and other students whose voices historically have been omitted from school curriculums. Meanwhile, this brand of multiculturalism does little to help students whose voices historically have been honored at school become aware of and question their privilege. In both cases, we're doing a disservice to our students.

To be clear, we're not suggesting that something is inherently wrong with celebrating diversity. We're not necessarily suggesting that schools abandon the diversity parade or the multicultural art festival. Our concern is that, all too often, these sorts of initiatives mask, rather than address, serious equity concerns. They become distinctly *un*multicultural when we don't offer them alongside more serious curricular (and institutional) attention to issues like racism and homophobia because they present the illusion of multicultural learning even as they guarantee a lack of sophisticated multicultural learning.

What we *are* suggesting is that at the heart of a curriculum that is meaningfully multicultural lie principles of equity and social justice—purposeful attention to issues like racism, homophobia, sexism, and economic inequality. Without this core, what we do in the name of multiculturalism can border on exploitative: asking students and families who experience these inequalities to allow students and families who don't experience them to grow their knowledge, while the inequalities themselves go unaddressed. *There's racism at this school, and nobody's doing anything about it!*

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Overcoming the "Culture" Fetish

In her article, "It's Not the Culture of Poverty, It's the Poverty of Culture," Gloria Ladson-Billings (2006) explains how culture fetishism undermines education equity. "Culture," she explains, "is randomly and regularly used to explain everything" (p. 104). It's used, in effect, as a stand-in for race, class, language, and other issues that aren't as comfortably discussed as broad, vague "cultures."

Many of the most popular frameworks for creating more inclusive classrooms and curriculums continue this culture fetish. In addition to multiculturalism, we have intercultural and cross-cultural education, cultural competence and cultural proficiency, culturally relevant pedagogy, and culturally responsive teaching. And despite the fact that social scientists debunked the concept in the early 1970s, the "culture of poverty" remains the dominant framework in U.S. education circles for understanding the lives of low-income students.

Of course, some focus on culture is warranted. Culture is an important aspect of student experience to consider in efforts to create a meaningfully multicultural curriculum and a more equitable school. Moreover, some of these frameworks, including cultural relevance and cultural responsiveness, are rooted in principles of equity (Ladson-Billings, 1995). The challenge is to retain principles of equity as central aspects of a multicultural curriculum that is truly meaningful, even if—especially if—it feels easier or safer to home in on more simplistic notions of culture.

Embracing Equity Literacy

In our own teaching, as well as in our work with schools and school districts, we embrace a framework for both multicultural curriculum development and bigger efforts to create equitable classrooms and schools. We call this framework *equity literacy*. Its central tenet is that any meaningful approach to diversity or multiculturalism relies more on teachers' understandings of equity and inequity and of justice and injustice than on their understanding of this or that culture (Gorski, 2013). It relies, as well, on teachers' abilities to cultivate in students a robust understanding about how people are treated by one another and by institutions, in addition to a general appreciation of diversity (Swalwell, 2011). The idea is to place *equity*, rather than *culture*, at the center of the diversity conversation.

Key to developing equity literacy for educators and students is cultivating

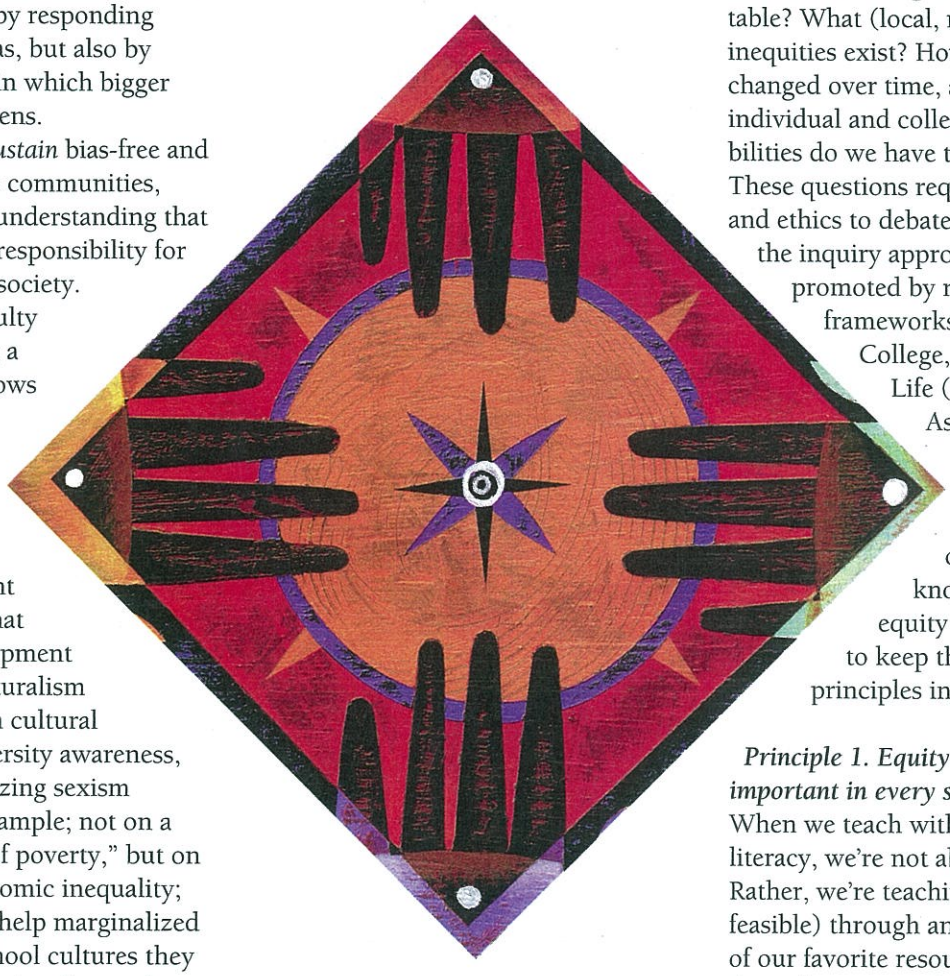
four abilities (Gorski, 2013). These include the ability to

- *Recognize* even subtle forms of bias, discrimination, and inequity.
- *Respond to* bias, discrimination, and inequity in a thoughtful and equitable manner.
- *Redress* bias, discrimination, and inequity, not only by responding to interpersonal bias, but also by studying the ways in which bigger social change happens.
- *Cultivate and sustain* bias-free and discrimination-free communities, which requires an understanding that doing so is a basic responsibility for everyone in a civil society.

Part of the difficulty with implementing a curriculum that grows these abilities in young people is that we educators must first grow them in ourselves. We might start by ensuring that professional development related to multiculturalism focuses not only on cultural competence or diversity awareness, but also on recognizing sexism and ableism, for example; not on a mythical "culture of poverty," but on responding to economic inequality; and not on how to help marginalized students fit into school cultures they experience as alienating, but on how to redress the alienation by making changes in our own practices and policies.

We recognize this is a daunting task, and we understand the pressure of feeling *here's one more thing I need to squeeze into an already packed workday*. But then we remember Cynthia's exhortation: "There's racism at this school, and nobody's doing anything about it!" We don't have control over everything, but to the extent that we *do* influence the curriculum, we feel an urgency to avoid the kind of well-intended complacency we found at Green Hills High.

The good news is that there are many powerful models for what a curriculum oriented around equity literacy looks like in practice (see "Great Equity Literacy Resources," p. 39). Teacher-led organizations around the United States have developed rich databases of curriculums that can (and should) be modified for local contexts. Nobody needs to start from scratch.



Five Guiding Principles

It can be difficult to paint a precise picture of what an equity literacy curriculum looks like because, like all curriculums, it will look different depending on contextual factors. What we can say is that, rather than a list of facts or historical figures that everyone should know (as in E. D. Hirsch's "cultural literacy" lists), an equity literacy curriculum focuses on essential questions like these: What makes something equitable or inequitable? What (local, regional, global) inequities exist? How have they changed over time, and why? What individual and collective responsibilities do we have to address them? These questions require both evidence and ethics to debate. They fit well with the inquiry approach to education promoted by recent curriculum frameworks, such as the College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) framework.

As we plan curriculum for our students and work to develop our own skills and knowledge related to equity literacy, it's useful to keep the following five principles in mind.

Principle 1. Equity literacy is important in every subject area. When we teach with and for equity literacy, we're not abandoning content. Rather, we're teaching content (when feasible) through an equity lens. One of our favorite resources for teaching through an equity literacy lens is Eric Gutstein and Bob Peterson's *Rethinking Mathematics* (Rethinking Schools, 2013). In it, these educators provide multiple examples of teaching math in a way that develops students' mathematical abilities while also helping them see math as a powerful analytical tool for addressing social problems.

For instance, students can develop formulas for how best to calculate a living wage, examine historical trends in wealth and poverty, or map income data in their own communities. Their

findings can become fertile ground for rich discussions, deliberations, and debates about the nature of economic inequality.

Principle 2. The most effective equity literacy approach is integrative and interdisciplinary.
It's easy to see how equity literacy naturally favors interdisciplinary inquiry. As we see in the math example above, students would also engage with reading, writing, speaking, history, and civics.

Science, technology, engineering, and the arts similarly could be tapped as students grapple with real-world equity issues in their communities. Sánchez (2014) describes an interdisciplinary project in which teams of students at a high-poverty school examined challenges in their racially segregated and economically strained community. One group, the Park Fixers, was frustrated "with having insufficient and unsafe equipment for students to play on during recess" (p. 185). Group members were also concerned that the children who lived in an adjacent low-income housing project had no place to play.

With guidance from teachers, the Park Fixers applied a wide variety of skills and an impressive depth of knowledge to address this community challenge they had identified. The students used video and still photography to document the conditions of the park. They used language arts and math skills to craft community surveys, distribute them, and analyze the results. They practiced communication skills by composing and sending letters to several key community members. They even worked with an urban design specialist who helped them capture their vision for a new park in blueprints. Finally, they delivered both oral and written reports to their teachers that incorporated all the material they had gathered.

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Teachers considering similar approaches shouldn't feel discouraged if students don't see the fruits of their efforts within the school year. As Schultz (2008) notes, "spectacular things happen along the way" when students are engaged in this kind of work; the process is just as important—if not more important—than the actual outcome of their efforts.

By engaging students in this way, the teachers modeled equity literacy. They acknowledged what the students knew all along—that they were targets of bias and inequity. What was happening to their park wasn't happening to the parks in wealthier neighborhoods. The teachers also helped strengthen students' equity literacy by *integrating* lessons about math, writing, and other subjects with an opportunity to apply academic skills to redress this inequity. Cultivating equity literacy is most effective when it's integrated into the broader curriculum rather than segregated into disconnected activities and when it's a schoolwide commitment rather than isolated in one or two teachers' classrooms.

Principle 3. Students of all ages are primed for equity literacy.
Did we mention that the Park Fixers were 3rd graders? The most common rebuke we hear when we talk about equity literacy goes something like this: *My students are too young to talk about that stuff.* If you're thinking the same thing, consider this: Even preschool-age children have been exposed to socializing messages about themselves and one another—often even at school. Many students already knowingly experience bias and discrimination, and those who don't often learn that it's impolite to mention any distinctions. For example, researchers have found that children as young as three or four already differentiate racial categories—they're not, as we may want to believe, "color-blind" (Olson, 2013; Winkler, 2009).

So when we say or think that students are "too young" to talk about issues like racism, it's important that we stop and reflect on whom, exactly, we're trying to protect. Are we protecting the students who are experiencing racial bias by sidestepping conversations about race, even as we ask them to celebrate diversity?

In our experience, the younger we start, the better. By integrating issues of equity into the content at young ages, we help all students develop the skills and language they need to explore complex and controversial issues in a community of people who may disagree about what's going on or what should be done about it. Equally important, we demonstrate to students who are the targets of bias and inequity that their experiences matter, and we offer them an opportunity to challenge their peers' misperceptions. As a result, they may experience the more celebratory, surface-level multicultural initiatives as safer and more legitimate. Meanwhile, students who enjoy more privileged identities become better able to interpret the

stereotypes and biases that feed any misperceptions they might have about the more marginalized people in their communities.

Principle 4. Students from all backgrounds need equity literacy. Many of the common examples of equity literacy in action come from high-poverty schools serving large percentages of students of color and nonnative speakers of English. Unfortunately, this can lead some people to believe that white and wealthy students wouldn't benefit from a curriculum informed by equity literacy. In fact, these students may have the steepest learning curves when it comes to learning about bias, discrimination, and inequity. Traditional forms of multicultural education that focus on celebrating diversity rather than equity can reinforce their misunderstandings by feeding the assumption that celebrating diversity is enough—that everybody is starting on a level playing field.

A growing body of research provides helpful examples of how to engage more privileged students in an equity literacy curriculum (Swalwell, 2013). In one elite K–8 private school, teachers meet regularly in professional development study groups focused on race, gender, and social class to design curriculum and share their work. While the 8th grade teachers have asked their students to examine real-world historical and contemporary wealth gap data, the 4th grade teachers are inviting their students to share, in journal entries, what they know about being rich and poor, and the kindergarten teacher is designing a simple simulation of unequal distribution of resources.

The teachers are also compiling a list of formal and informal ways that class advantage goes unchecked at their school—for example, how morning meeting questions can sometimes invite students to brag about their material possessions. The teachers' ultimate goal is to help students do more than simply "be nice" to people with less privilege; they want their students to understand the issues involved and commit to working toward a society with less economic inequality.

Great Equity Literacy Resources

Here are some of our favorite—and free—resources for an equity literacy curriculum:

- EdChange (www.edchange.org/multicultural/teachers.html)
- Education for Liberation Lab (www.edliberation.org/resources/lab)
- GLSEN (http://glsen.org/educate/resources/curriculum)
- New York Collective of Radical Educators (www.nycore.org/curricula)
- SoJust (www.sojust.net)
- Teachers for Social Justice (www.teachersforjustice.org/search/label/all%20curriculum)
- Teaching Economics As If People Mattered (www.teachingeconomics.org)
- Teaching for Change (www.teachingforchange.org)
- Teaching Tolerance (www.tolerance.org/classroom-resources)
- Zinn Education Project (http://zinnedproject.org)

Principle 5. Teaching for equity literacy is a political act—but not more so than* not *teaching for equity literacy. Another common rebuke we hear is that teaching for equity literacy introduces views about social justice into the curriculum that don't belong in school. But is teaching about poverty or sexism more political than pretending that poverty and sexism don't exist by omitting them from the curriculum? How might we explain the politics of *not* teaching about these issues when many of our students are experiencing them, even within school? How can we prepare youth to be active participants in a democracy without teaching them about the most formidable barriers to an authentic democracy?

According to Hess and McAvoy (2014), there's no silver bullet for engaging students in discussions about important and often controversial issues, but rather a series of factors that teachers must weigh to introduce these issues ethically and responsibly. It's important for teachers to consider when to withhold or disclose their personal views and how to frame issues in relation to their students, the subject matter they're teaching, and the community.

Ultimately, Hess and McAvoy conclude, classrooms should directly engage students in answering the question, How *should* we live together? It's a nonpartisan question like its empirical cousin, How *do* we live together? but a deeply political one that's essential in a diverse society based on democratic principles and committed to equity.

A More Meaningful Investment

As Cynthia taught us ("There's racism at this school, and no one's doing anything about it!"), students who feel marginalized in our schools may experience what we thought to be meaningful multicultural curriculums

as a purposeful avoidance of a more serious reality. When we invest our multicultural energies in surface-level cultural exchanges, fantasies of color-blindness, or celebrations of white-washed heroes while ignoring the actual inequities many of our students face, we demonstrate an implicit complicity with those inequities.

We can avoid these pitfalls by building our multicultural curriculum efforts, not around cultural awareness or cultural diversity, but around the cultivation of equity literacy in both ourselves and our students. EL

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