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# AFFIRMING STUDENTS' RACIAL AND CULTURAL IDENTITIES IN CURRICULA

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By James Bridgeforth, Ph.D.

Racial Equity Guidance for K-12 Teachers



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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James C. Bridgeforth is an educator, researcher, and policy advocate. He has extensive experience collaborating with practitioners and conducting equity-focused, policy-oriented educational research. Drawing on his professional experiences across K-12 and higher education contexts, his nationally recognized scholarship critically examines issues of racism, power, leadership, and learning in K-12 schools. James holds a PhD in Urban Education Policy (University of Southern California '23), an MEd in Educational Administration and Policy (University of Georgia '17), and a B.A. in Political Science and Sociology (Georgia College & State University '13).

## ABOUT THE SERIES

This practice brief is one of eight in a series of resources published by USC Race and Equity Center for every K-12 school and teacher education program across America. Guidance is offered to educators who are serious about achieving equitable learning conditions and outcomes for students, families, and teachers of color, despite increasing public scrutiny, executive gag orders, and legislative censorship. Each brief introduces research, practical examples, reflective questions, and useful strategies for educators advancing racial equity.

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# Affirming Students' Racial and Cultural Identities in Curricula

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Morning meetings are a longstanding, common occurrence in K-12 schools throughout the United States (Bondy & Ketts, 2001). Alternately known as morning circles or by many other names, these spaces offer students and educators a dedicated opportunity for community building where members of the classroom community can share, learn, and grow with each other (Tilhou, 2020). Several years ago, I conducted an observation of an elementary school student teacher facilitating a morning meeting. This observation experience provides a useful entry point into the importance of affirming students' racial and cultural identities.

The particular meeting at the heart of this anecdote followed a similar structure to many others: starting with a greeting and transitioning into a group activity and a time for sharing. Close to the end of the meeting, the class began a discussion about various holidays that were celebrated throughout the world. As the discussion continued, one of the Black students remarked "Oh yeah! Holidays like Juneteenth!" A puzzled look came across the White teacher's face. They nodded and affirmed the student's statement, but also shared that they were not familiar with Juneteenth, the

holiday commemorating the end of U.S. slavery. The morning meeting continued, but I don't think that I will ever forget the look of shock and confusion on the student's face. It is important here to note that this school was a predominantly Black school in a predominantly Black city with a rich history in the U.S. Civil Rights Movement.

Later in the day, as the teacher and I debriefed about that day's lessons and plans for the next day, the Juneteenth moment from the morning meeting came up. They explained that they knew as soon as it happened that this was an important learning opportunity. They quickly recognized the need to continue to build their own knowledge about the racial and cultural backgrounds of the students in our classroom and committed to doing so. At the next day's morning meeting, the teacher used part of the shared time to openly apologize to the class for not knowing about Juneteenth. The class went on to have a meaningful discussion about the history of the holiday, including the now-excited student who had initially discussed Juneteenth.

Despite significant efforts to incorporate the histories, experiences, and contributions of people of color into K-12 schools (Ladson-Billings, 1999), scholars have found that K-12 classrooms often remain devoid of histories, contributions, and cultures of racially minoritized groups (Allen, 2017; Brown & Au, 2014; Au et al., 2016). For example, in 2016, Margot Lee Shetterly published *Hidden Figures*, the groundbreaking account of the lives of four Black women mathematicians and scientists: Katherine Johnson, Dorothy Vaughan, Mary Jackson, and Christine Darden. As noted in the book and eventual movie adaptation, the stories of these Black women were representative of the countless Black scientists, engineers, and mathematicians relegated to the margins of history through inaccurate and revisionist educational resources (Allen, 2017). Researchers Wood et al. (2020) conducted a demographic analysis of biology textbooks where they found that representations of scientists generally remain male and White, despite the growing numbers of women and people of color in STEM fields.

Similarly, Chu's (2017) analysis of social studies textbooks explained how even as the inclusion of racially minoritized groups in curricula has increased over time, representations of people of color largely remain static and primarily beholden to stereotypical, inaccurate, and incomplete depictions. And Lovern (2012) describes how Indigenous students have at times been forced to choose between calling out disrespectful and historically inaccurate portrayals of Indigenous cultures while also navigating

feelings of guilt experienced by the teachers engaging in these pedagogical practices.

Knowing that this curricular reality exists in schools throughout the nation, it is clear that there is much work to be done in ensuring students' racial and cultural identities are affirmed within their classrooms. The following strategies and recommendations in this brief build on the rich legacy of efforts to provide racially and culturally relevant, responsive, and sustaining education in schools (Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paris, 2012).

# Understand the Racial and Cultural Histories in your School Community

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Racially and culturally affirming teaching practices require educators to know the histories, backgrounds, and lived realities within their school communities so that they may leverage students' inherent cultural and linguistic strengths to support whole child development (Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995). Rolón-Dow (2005) makes clear that in order to authentically demonstrate care for students of color, teachers “must seek to understand the role that race/ethnicity has played in shaping and defining the sociocultural and political conditions of their communities” (p. 104).

It is important to name that this critical work of affirming students' racial and cultural experiences is not synonymous with the presence of disdain, contempt, or pity (Paris & Alim, 2014). This is not a call to use histories and present-day realities of marginalization and disenfranchisement to lower expectations for students of color or engage in what Curry (2016) describes as “soft care” where well-meaning teachers engage in *pobrecito* (poor little kid) pedagogical practices. Rather this work seeks first to better understand

the richness and complexities of students' cultures and then how those cultural assets can be meaningfully infused into the classroom environment for students' growth and learning.

Teachers must also be able to recognize cultural dynamism in that culture is ever-evolving and not simply resigned to its histories (Paris, 2012). For example, the culture of Black Americans does not begin and end with the traditions and histories of slavery and the Civil Rights Movement. While undoubtedly, and in some ways, inextricably linked, Paris and Alim (2014) remind us that our racially and culturally affirming teaching practices must aim to sustain both traditional cultural understandings in addition to the inevitable cultural evolutions.



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## Questions for Consideration

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Whether pre-service educators, in-service educators, or preparers of educators, it is important that we reflect on our understandings of the racial and cultural histories of our learning environments. Take stock of what you currently know about what Paris (2012) describes as *heritage practices and community practices*.

- a. Consider what you know about the legacies of the communities that surround you. How have things changed? How are they the same? Where can you learn more? Who can you learn from?

# Embrace Equity Audits in Course Curricula

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Course syllabi and scope and sequences can provide critical insight into the institutional teaching culture and learning outcomes that are valued in educational spaces (Eberly et al., 2001; Roberts, 2016). Therefore, these documents can also be particularly useful opportunities for analysis when attempting to understand the extent to which racially and culturally affirming practices are operationalized within the classroom. Equity audits are one promising practice that educators can use to better understand the extent to which curricula are racially and culturally affirming.

Equity audits are not new to educational spaces and have been conducted in a variety of contexts regarding demographic representation in school curricula (Balkaran & Roberts, 2019; Gangi, 2008; Green & Hopenwasser, 2017). These audits allow educators to critically examine curricular materials and pedagogical practices through an equity-oriented lens in order to revise and enhance the materials that students are provided. It is important to note that this practice does not have to be done in

isolation as individual teachers or educators.

While initially conceptualized as a process for educational leaders to support equitable school-community outcomes, Green's (2017) community-based equity audit strategy, grounded in Freirean (2017) tenets of dialogue including: love, humility, faith, hope, and critical thinking, can also be employed at the classroom level. A community-oriented approach, whether involving grade-level teams, professional learning communities, and even students and families, can provide opportunities for critical dialogue about the school community's vision and priorities, including how the curriculum is culturally sustaining for students.

While equity audits can be a powerful tool in better understanding the extent to which classroom curricula is racially and culturally affirming, it is just as important to ensure that there are opportunities to meaningfully address the findings of the audits. Throughout my time across K-12 and higher education, I have consistently observed that we are remarkably

gifted in recognizing and acknowledging disparities and issues. Yet, once these disparities have been recognized, the difficulty lies in determining what, if anything, to do next.

After evaluating curricular materials for racially and culturally affirming materials, Freeman and Freeman (2004) offer key insights on what educators can do next, specifically including students in the process of selecting culturally relevant texts. Their rubric uses a series of questions to guide the evaluation of given texts that could be helpful for pre- and in-service educators, including:

1. Are the characters in the story like you and your family?
2. Have you ever had an experience like one described in this story?
3. Could this story take place this year?
4. Do the characters talk like you and your family do?
5. How often do you read stories like these?

These questions are aligned with Paris and Alim's (2014) call to embrace the dynamic nature of culture rather than being beholden to historical conceptions of cultural experiences. By connecting students' lived experiences to the curricula that they are exposed to, this process also encourages students to critically analyze both the narratives employed in texts and the ways that these narratives are taken up in educational spaces. While certainly not a panacea for the depth of culturally un-sustaining and irrelevant curricula in K-12 schools, these practices can be initial steps in affirming students' identities in classrooms.



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## Questions for Consideration

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**1**

As you consider equity audits as a tool for evaluating course syllabi, scope and sequences, and other curricular materials, the following questions can be helpful in guiding your initial analysis:

- a. Is the object of analysis (e.g., syllabus or course plan) culturally sustaining? By culturally sustaining, we mean intentionally seeking to perpetuate, foster, and sustain linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as a part of the democratic project of schooling (Paris, 2012).
- b. In what ways does the object of analysis provide opportunities for students to reflect on their own racial and cultural identities?

**2**

Although the example provided above is situated in a literature course, consider how these practices might be employed across content areas? For example, how might educators engage students in critical analysis of STEM texts?

# Looking Ahead

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I want to end this brief by reiterating the goals of embracing and affirming students racial and cultural identities in curricula. Ford (2010) reminds us that culturally responsive instruction can be a mechanism through which educators, students, and families can build learning experiences that are seamless across all aspects of students' lives. These opportunities allow students to bring their full selves into educational spaces where their racial and cultural identities are not simply tolerated or accepted, but valued and honored. Importantly, affirming students' racial and cultural identities should not be a mechanism for cultural assimilation. Rather, the specificity and uniqueness of students' cultural strengths must be situated as their gifts. Ensuring that students see their experiences, their hopes, their dreams, and themselves in their curricula is the purpose, the challenge, and the heart of this work.

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## **ABOUT THE USC RACE AND EQUITY CENTER**

The University of Southern California is home to a dynamic research and organizational improvement center that helps professionals in educational institutions, corporations, and other contexts strategically develop and achieve equity goals, better understand and correct climate problems, avoid and recover from racial crises, and engineer sustainable cultures of inclusion and respect. Evidence, as well as scalable and adaptable models of success, inform our rigorous approach. Grants from the Ford, Lumina, Bill and Melinda Gates, W.K. Kellogg, Kresge, and Open Society Foundations have funded the Center's research and partnerships.

The Center is home to the USC Equity Leadership Academies (a professional learning and organizational change series for K-12 schools and districts), USC Equity Institutes (a professional learning and organizational change series for higher education institutions), the National Assessment of Collegiate Campus Climates (a quantitative survey), PRISM (a racial equity employee recruitment tech tool for higher education), and the Alliance for Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion in Business.