

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.

Many initiatives
present the illusion
of multicultural
learning even as
they guarantee a
lack of sophisticated
multicultural learning.

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

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>)

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.

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. ■

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