Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

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DEI Terms:

Too often diversity, equity, and inclusion become buzzwords. Their intended transformative power gets dulled and depoliticized as they circulate and get deployed for different purposes. It is vital for educators to struggle against this tendency and make these concepts foundational to the way they approach education.

So, what is diversity, equity, and inclusion? Diversity is the recognition of human difference in all of its guises. What often goes unrecognized when people talk about diversity is the ways in which power asymmetries inform what these differences mean in our everyday lives. Celebrating diversity without scrutinizing and dismantling these power asymmetries is at best virtue-signaling and at its worst reproducing inequalities.

This brings us to equity and inclusion. It is useful to think about equity and inclusion as interrelated projects to grapple with on-going historical traumas and injustices. Equity often gets mistaken for equality. Equality refers to the equal treatment of and opportunity for people regardless of their group affiliation or social identity. Equal treatment does not redress historically, deeply ingrained and ongoing injustices. "Equity goes beyond equality" (Nieto and Bode, 2012, p. 7). Students, for example, enter schools with different sets of advantages and disadvantages shaped by our country's long history of racism. Equitable education is action-oriented. It is the project of proactively (re)distributing resources so all students can thrive and enjoy the privileges that have been for so long accessed by only a few in the United States. Equitable education "provides students with the resources and opportunities they need *to achieve equality*" (Nieto and Bode, 2012, p. 7, emphasis in original).

Inclusion, like equity, recognizes that people have been excluded from equal participation in society based on variables outside of their control, (often rooted in white supremacy and eugenics). Inclusion recognizes the ways in which human difference has been socially constructed in ways that devalues and stigmatizes some people and has historically denied them equal access to vital services, such as high- quality education. Inclusion is not just getting diverse people together. It is rethinking our physical and social spaces so all people can participate and thrive together in meaningful ways. This takes not only fiscal investment but socio-cultural change. It requires changing the ways we value people and recognizing the ways our social and built environments must change to fit a radical new valuation.

Perspective:

To make schools more equitable and inclusive, it is necessary for educational institutions to be deeply committed to multicultural and anti-racist education. Multicultural education should be, at its core, anti-racist. Unfortunately, when some schools claim multiculturalism as a value, they often focus

more on celebrating cultural differences (think heritage potlatches and festivals) than as a philosophy that permeates the curriculum, school culture, and relationships (Nieto and Boden, 2012, p. 38). In the former, multicultural education can feel surface level and token. In the latter, educators realize that meaningful multicultural education is pervasive and puts social justice front and center (Nieto and Boden, 2012, p. 39).

A truly pervasive multicultural education requires commitments to socio-political reforms, including among other things, desegregating our schools, challenging systems that favor some students over others (e.g., ability tracking), and changing our curriculums so they represent the perspectives and voices of marginalized communities (Nieto and Boden, 2012, p. 39). Schools are microcosms for society at large. To change schools, requires a commitment to changing society at large and visa versa. Multicultural education puts social justice at its core. Truly embracing schools as sites where people are prepared to become critical global, democratic citizens requires a radical rethinking of educational philosophies and methods. Teaching is not a neutral exercise. It is always political. The current methods used to educate, assess, and value students reproduce our current political economic realities. For example, pedagogies that position students as passive learners create docile, compliant citizens. To create an active citizenry thus requires an entirely different praxis, one that forefronts social justice.
To make social justice a core tenet of American public education, teachers have to change the ways they think about and approach education, including their relationships with students. These are not smooth or easy shifts. They also require institutional support, but teachers have considerable power to get the ball rolling.

Teachers can start with committing to anti-racist education. Anti-racist education involves not only recognizing that students come to the classroom different sets of advantages and disadvantages but that the school is a social site where such disparities get reproduced. Teachers can act as agents of social change, disrupting these systems of oppression. Anti-racist education is reflexive about this ugly reality and works from the inside, out to change the role of education in reproducing racist discourses. It helps prepare students with the knowledge and skills to combat racism in their everyday lives. Among other things, this means teaching hard history, bringing more diverse voices into the curriculum, and actively combatting discrimination in all of its guises.

Who you are:

To be an anti-racist, multicultural educator begins with reflecting on one's own positionality and the ways it informs how one is in the world. This is not a one-time exercise but requires continual hard and sometimes uncomfortable work. We bring into the classroom implicit biases that directly influence

the success and well-being of our students. We must scrutinize our biases and put systems in place to guard against them.

So, who am I? What are my social identities? How do the perspectives and experiences I bring into the classroom influence my pedagogy? I was raised in the American South, in a county named after Robert E. Lee. As a child, I was unaware of how the confederate legacy of my home county's name would come to imprint my experiences and shape my social identity as a white, middle-class, Jewish, Southern woman.

My father's family immigrated from Eastern Europe shortly before my grandparents' births during World War I. Their families were part of a wave of immigrants that sent shock waves through the eugenic establishment in the United States. Fear that this new wave of Eastern European immigrants would stifle American progress by introducing racially and culturally inferior stock to the American population, policymakers drafted strict immigration laws. The reverberations of such laws can be felt today in contemporary discussions of immigration and belonging in the United States. My grandparents' Latvian and Polish families joined a burgeoning Jewish enclave in Birmingham, Alabama. My grandparents, only sixteen, met and married in the same neighborhood where they were both born and raised. They had a clandestine wedding shortly before my grandfather enlisted, underage, in WWII. When my father was a child they moved to Florida for new opportunities. My grandfather's stints as a door-to-door salesman led him to the tombstone business, which he owned and operated until he started a small electronics business with his three children in my hometown. There, at my family's small business, my parents met.

My mother's family history differed considerably from my father's heritage. During her senior year of high school, she migrated from New Jersey to Florida. The year she arrived in Florida was her senior year of high school, 1969, and the year local schools began integrating. The overt racism and violence that ensued with school integration shocked her. She resented the upheaval the move caused in her life. The racial drama occurring at her school exacerbated her sense of unbelonging.

My maternal grandfather moved the family to Florida to further realize his career ambitions. He had worked his way up from a bank teller to bank president. He embodied the rags to riches story we associate with the American dream. Tragically orphaned as a teenager, abandoned by his father, through his smarts, hard work, and ambition, he rose in the ranks in spite of his traumatic adolescence. It is the type of story that has reached the level of mythology in the American imagination. But as in much mythology, the gods at the center of these tales pay little regard to how their actions affect mere mortals. The story of my grandfather's ascent, the American dream personified, leaves out the personal stories of abuse and loss that marked those close to him. The American dream that he embodied also leaves untold the ways in which whiteness and maleness [and luck] underwrites who realizes such dreams.

My grandfather, with much pride, would often recite the legacy of our ancestors in shaping the United States. Every other generation, he would tell my older brothers, someone has done something great, implying himself and implicating his grandchildren. He would regale us with stories of Roger Sherman signing the Declaration of Independence. He laid claim to William Tecumseh Sherman and his military feats that helped bring the Civil War to an end, adding him to the canon of greatness in our family line.

General Sherman is one of those historical figures who acts as a Rorschach test, often telling us more about the one evoking his memory than about the complicated man or his deeds. My grandfather was no exception. It was the esteem and accomplishment, not the complicated history of his deeds and unmet promises, that appeared to inspire him. There was no mention of redistributing resources to the formerly enslaved or the death and destruction he left in his wake when he invoked his memory. In the South, where the Lost Cause narratives still reign, Sherman has been villainized. “Don’t say you are related to General Sherman,” I remember relatives warning, half-joking, half-serious.

But, I bear the name Bloomston, not Sherman. I am an insider/outsider to the legacy my grandfather invoked. He looked to my older brothers as potential bearers of his legacy. To my maternal grandfather-- a man who I remember giving accolades to the book The Bell Curve-- my younger siblings and I shared an Otherness that excluded us from carrying on this legacy. And, on virtue of simply being female, we were excluded from directly sharing in such a legacy.

My social identity is located at the intersection of these two historical experiences. But, like all people, my social identity cannot be reduced simply to genealogy. My social identity has changed and fluctuated over time, connected to the changing sets of opportunities outside of my own control and those that were, at least partially, results of my own agency. But throughout, my whiteness has acted as a safety net. It historically allowed me to access certain advantages built up over generations. It protected me, for example, as an adolescent from the harshest effects of economic insecurity when family fortunes changed.

Many Americans share, to varying degrees, a double or triple consciousness, where they feel acutely their alienation from a society that has historically oppressed and devalued them. Continually trying to understand the socio-economic and psychological turmoil white supremacy and patriarchy, among other things, have wrought on those surrounding us requires radical empathy. It has shaped my identity as an anti-racist, feminist and motivated my pursuit of education.

Philosophy:

I am committed to an equity-centered teaching philosophy that cares for the whole-child, forefront students’ strengths, promotes student-led inquiry, and adopts culturally responsive teaching

practices. This will provide me as a social studies educator the orientation to not only attend to the inequities inside my classroom, but also a framework to empower students to see themselves as critical civil actors.

Public school educators are at the vanguard of bridging achievement-resource-expectation gaps that are a direct consequence of severe, socio-economic inequalities. While large-scale structural change is necessary to ultimately remedy the inequitable "contexts and conditions in which students learn", classrooms are an important place where educational justice can happen at a micro-scale (Nieto and Boden, 2012, p. 9).

Public school students come from a variety of backgrounds and bring to the classroom diverse strengths. An equity-centered pedagogy will help me create a more inclusive classroom environment that builds on these strengths. But inclusivity must be embedded in a commitment to educational justice for it to be meaningful. Recognition of difference is not enough. Situations outside the classroom are not equitable and what happens inside a classroom must attend to these inequities.

First, as an educator I believe it is necessary to forefront the whole child. A child's potential to succeed inside the classroom is directly related to their physical, emotional and social health outside of it. I will try to be attuned to the struggles of students as they relate to, for example, learning differences, inconsistent housing, food insecurity, documented status, racism and trauma. This requires building trust and empathy with not only individual students but their families and the communities in which they are a part.

Second, I will adopt an asset or strength-based approach to education. This means creating an environment that respects and celebrates difference. Too often students' diverse backgrounds are constructed as barriers rather than strengths, with detrimental consequences to self-esteem and a sense of belonging. Recognizing and leveraging student's strengths in the classroom is vital.

Third, I will implement youth-centered pedagogies. Teachers can empower students to be change agents. This perspective is extremely important as a correction to how social studies education has been historically mired in problematic meta-narratives that misrepresent marginalized communities, remove their historical agencies, and brush over structural inequalities and historical traumas. Youth-centered pedagogies envision educators and students as on a joint journey of learning and unlearning. This educational journey begins with student-led inquiry whereby the teacher really listens to the questions that are compelling to students' everyday lives and designs curriculum around them.

Finally, I will strive to be culturally responsive in my orientation and in the teaching strategies I adopt. Culturally responsive teaching provides concrete strategies to teach in more equitable and meaningful ways across lines of difference. It forces the educator to realize the extent to which their teaching style (and the curriculum itself) is already embedded in a particular culture (in many cases,

dominant white, middle class culture). Rather than ask students to do all of the work in adapting their learning to their teacher or school's culture, it asks educators to become aware of their students' cultures and adapt their teaching to it. It encourages teachers to develop teaching strategies in ways that uses "the cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as conduits for teaching them more effectively" (Gay, 2001, p. 106). While building trust with students, scrutinizing our biases, and creating sufficient support systems for students is important, if we do not make concrete changes in our practices that actually help students learn, these other shifts are not as meaningful. It does little to help the sixth grader reading at a second-grade level.

Practices:

What will these philosophical commitments look like in practice? What practices will I adopt to create an equitable and inclusive classroom? Below are some practices and approaches I will adopt. This is by no means an exhaustive list of approaches and/or strategies, but it provides a sense of how I envision an inclusive and equitable classroom culture is created.

Building relationships and creating a warm classroom environment: Creating an equitable, inclusive classroom begins with building trusting, warm, and communicative relationships with students, families, and their communities. Students and their families should be looked on as equal partners. Developing these relationships takes a lot of work, dedication and compassion. First and foremost, the teacher should be an advocate for the well-being of the student.

I plan to contact students and families as early in the school year as possible to begin developing rapport. This contact can take many forms. In some cases, I will rely on translators, but, for these families, I will also strive to communicate basic information and affection to them directly whenever appropriate. I think it is important to make a considerable effort to communicate in families' native languages when appropriate. This conveys willingness to share in the emotional and logistical burden of cross-linguistic communication—hopefully removing some of the barriers in seeing each other as equal partners— and communicates respect and solidarity.

This early contact with families will be continued and deepened throughout the school year, not just when an issue emerges. This helps families feel connected and increases the chances that when an issue does emerge communication can be concise and clear. It will help me more easily work in partnership (when appropriate) with caretakers to support the student. Caretakers should be hearing not only about their child's weakness and problem areas, but just as much about their strengths. Caretakers

need to know that the teacher deeply cares about and appreciates their child. This compassion and genuine interest are foundational to developing a strong partnership with the student and their family.
Building a classroom culture and strong relationships among students is just as, if not more, important as forging positive teacher-student and home-school relationships. I will strive to create a warm and inviting classroom environment, both physically and socio-culturally. The built environment, from accessibility to who is represented on the walls and in the bookshelves, to what languages are represented in classroom materials, matters considerably in creating a place where all students feel they belong. The physical environment helps create a sense of community. I want that sense of community to include *all* students. This extends to the ways in which students are grouped and desks are positioned. Students will be encouraged to create community with each other by having ample opportunities to work across lines of difference. Students will also be involved in creating the social norms and expectations of the classroom. I want them to be genuine stakeholders in the learning environment. Students will be positioned as active participants rather than passive actors in creating the classroom environment. Racism, sexism, ableism, etc. will be directly addressed and condoned in clear ways.

Whole-child approach: Punishing a student for circumstances in which they have no control reproduces inequalities inside the classroom and creates additional barriers to them succeeding. For instance, a student struggling with housing insecurity, may not have the emotional bandwidth or stable physical place to complete assignments outside of the classroom. Or a newly arrived student to the United States may just be learning English, coping with learning new cultural rules and norms, and grappling with trauma and/or economic insecurity. The classroom needs to be a safe, positive place for all students.

Situations outside of the classroom are not equitable and what happens inside a classroom needs to attend to these inequities. Accommodations, empathy, regular engagement with the family and, at times, the involvement of partnering professionals, such as social workers and occupational therapists, might be necessary for students to thrive (and, in some instances, to survive). It is vital that teachers have a good grasp of the resources available to support students, inside and outside the classroom and how to advocate on their behalf. A teacher is one link in a greater chain.

It is vital to develop good rapport with students and their families and play an active role in their communities. Ideally this involves reaching out to students and their families in whatever way is best suited to their needs as early in the school year as possible and continuing to do so on regular intervals. This may require home visits, bilingual communication and phone calls that accommodate parent work schedules.

It means working hard to build trust and safety with students and always treating them with respect and dignity regardless (and sometimes in spite) of the circumstances at hand. I think approaches to discipline should be developed mindful of inequities and teachers and administrators' hidden biases and

strive to boost students' self-esteem and self-worth, such as restorative justice approaches. Restorative justice reframes discipline, helping students make amends and reconcile with the community, rather than being purely punitive. I will work to advocate for my school site to mainstream restorative justice, but, regardless, I will incorporate restorative justice circles as part of my classroom culture.

Many students have experienced trauma and toxic stress that influence their ability to feel safe and succeed inside classrooms (Nieto and Bodin, 2012, p. 217). Trauma-informed care calls for the teacher to recognize the role of adverse childhood experiences (e.g., poverty, racism, abuse, neglect, etc.) in influencing children's executive functioning skills and abilities to learn effectively. Teachers need to express compassion and understanding when they react to student behaviors, remembering the ways in which toxic stress influences how students respond to different communications and circumstances. I will adopt trauma-informed communication styles and practices that help build resilience in students. Among other things, I will get trained in co-regulation strategies, create regularly scheduled stress-reduction practices in my classroom, make social studies engaging and relevant, and integrate the arts.

All students benefit from comprehensive social-emotional learning programs, especially those students who have experienced adverse childhood experiences. I will advocate for my school site to adopt a comprehensive social-emotional learning program. Regardless of school wide decisions, I will mainstream social-emotional learning into my curriculum. Social-emotional learning programs can help prevent "many behaviors that may put students at risk of interrupted schooling, such as drug use, violence, bullying, and dropping out" (Nieto and Bodin, 2012, p. 106). A key component of social emotional learning will be robust anti-bullying initiatives and helping students develop granular emotional vocabularies.

Humanizing pedagogy/ culturally-responsive teaching: While no pedagogy, teaching strategy, or curricular approach is a panacea to the current inequitable educational system in the United States, positioning students as active learners helps move us toward a more equitable and inclusive learning environment. For me this means a move away from lecture-based, more passive teaching strategies and a commitment to experimentation in teaching methods. This experimentation must be rooted in and responsive to socio-cultural diversity of my students (Gay, 2002). I am not committed to a single strategy, but rather a "humanizing pedagogy" that values the diversity of my students and is responsive to it (Nieto and Bodin, 2012, p. 105). Students' academic achievement will improve if they are taught through their "own cultural and experiential filters" (Gay, 2002, p. 106). This requires, as outlined above, a dedication to being open to really getting to know and respecting students, their families and their communities in deep, culturally-attuned ways. Methods will thus vary according to who is being taught. I will need to understand my students' "cultural values, traditions, communication, learning styles, contributions, and relational patterns" (Gay, 2002, p. 107). This means finding ways to participate in students' communities,

beyond my role as a teacher, to get to know in greater depth their cultures and values. With this knowledge I can adopt my teaching methods to be most beneficial to my students, including integrating cultural scaffolding, crafting culturally relevant curriculum, and adapting communication styles to better fit different cultural realities.

Rethinking social studies: One approach I intend to adopt is student-centered learning and student-led inquiry. In student-led inquiry the teacher really listens to the questions that are compelling to students and designs curriculum around them. This approach aligns very closely with the newer approaches in social studies (e.g., the C3 framework) that sees social studies learning as having real life purposes, encouraging students to become civically engaged civic actors.

I will move beyond the over-reliance on traditional social studies textbooks. These texts are often dry, not culturally relevant, and, oftentimes, biased. Many of these texts [and sometimes the standards itself] have reproduced meta-historical narratives that erase certain communities (such as African American, Latinos and LGTBQ communities), remove their historical agencies and/or ignore the past injustices that have all directly contributed to the structural inequities that our students live with today. When historically marginalized communities are included in the social studies curriculum, there is a tendency to whitewash the hard history and/or forefront an ethnocentric perspective.

For example, when teaching about the history of slavery in the United States, there is a tendency to gloss over its brutality, ignore resistance and the everyday lives of the enslaved, and the reconstruction and redemption periods that happened in the aftermath of the civil war and the abolishment of slavery. To not address this period of reconstruction and the reactionary politics of Jim Crow that followed leaves students without the tools to understand the role of history in shaping the contemporary racial inequalities in the United States.

There are many non-traditional ways to teach these stories when our traditional school textbooks are insufficient. I would draw on alternative texts, such as picture books, young adult fiction, primary source material, memoirs, and more modern storytelling formats such as history podcasts or Broadway musicals. Experimenting with multiple source material can entice and critically engage students in ways that traditional school texts cannot always accomplish. I will take advantage of resources like Teaching for Tolerance to broaden my own understanding and get curricular resources.

Asset/Strength-based practices: Often students' diverse backgrounds are constructed as barriers rather than strengths, with detrimental consequences to student self-esteem. For example, an immigrant student presents challenges because they are still gaining competency in English, but this same student brings immense strengths to the classroom, especially a social studies classroom. They bring multilingual and multicultural perspectives and varied socio-emotional knowledge and skills that can enrich learning for all students. These strengths should be celebrated as we are helping them cultivate their English skills.

Moreover, in the case of emergent bilingual students, the curriculum should include some activities designed to provide spaces for these students to engage and lead without the constraints of English language fluency. This could mean assignments that allow students to utilize non-verbal forms of communication, such as art and music, and providing supplementary materials in their native language as well. Some immigrant students are grappling with learning a new language and culture while also dealing with trauma. In such instances, cultivating a space of belonging and safety where students can boost their self-worth is crucial.

Conclusion:

As a future educator, I am committed to creating an equitable and inclusive classroom that serves all students. To do so, I must be dedicated to truly multicultural and antiracist education. Recognition of difference is not enough. Educators should understand how situations outside of the classroom are not equitable and what happens inside the classroom needs to attend to these inequities. For me, this means, among other things, being compassionate, reflexive, committed to culturally responsive teaching methods, taking into account the whole child, and adopting a humanizing pedagogy. I will strive to be an advocate for and ally to all my students.

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