

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 *hypervisible*. 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

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 par-

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:

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icipating 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 *unmulticultural* when we don't offer them alongside more serious curricular (and institutional) attention to issues like racism and homophobia because they present the

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!*

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 edu-

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

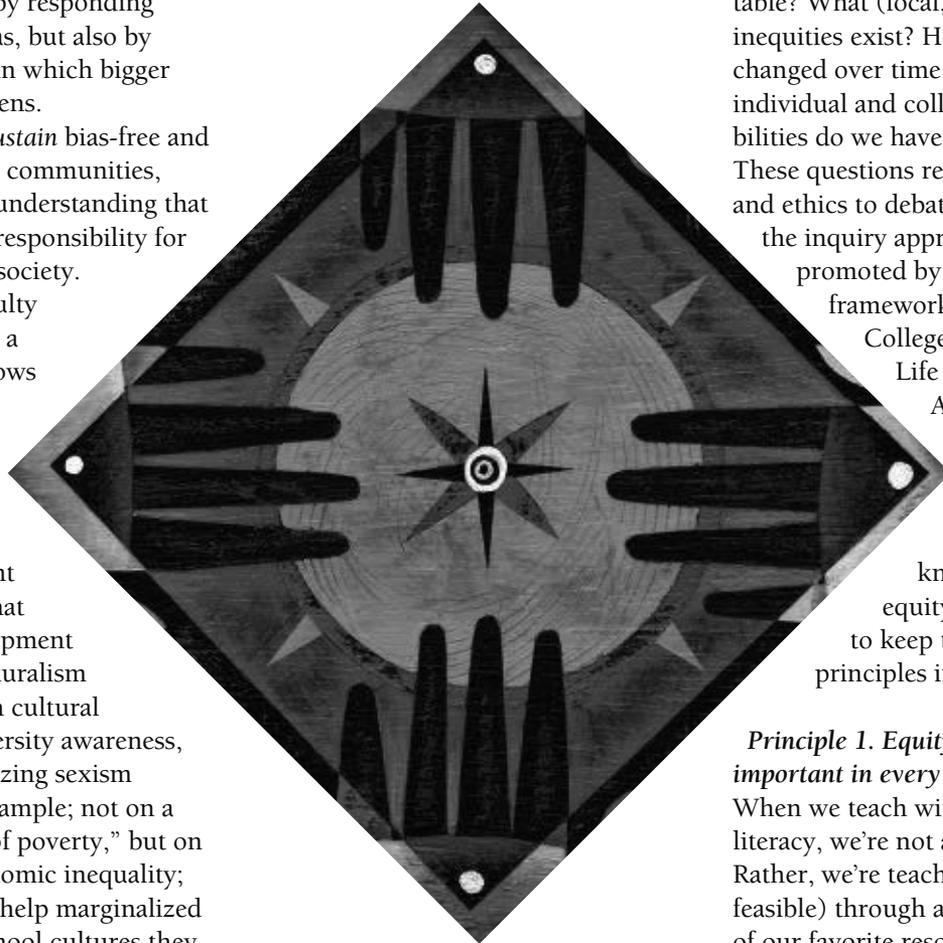
- *Recognize* even subtle forms of bias, discrimination, and inequity.
- *Respond* to bias, discrimination, and inequity in a thoughtful and equitable manner.
- *Redress* bias, discrimination, and inequity, not only by responding to interpersonal bias, but also by studying the ways in which bigger social 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

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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Equity Literacy

More Than Celebrating Diversity

Equity literacy means more than hosting multicultural arts-and-crafts fairs or diversity assemblies. It involves real conversations about issues like racism, economic inequality, sexism, homophobia and ableism.

By Paul C. Gorski

“Follow me and I’ll show you the problem,” John said as he rushed past me into the hallway. We moved quickly down a broad corridor past a diversity-themed student art display.

The Dean of Students at a suburban high school — I’ll call it Green Hills High — John was delighted as the student body grew more racially and economically diverse. Once populated almost exclusively by middle-class white students, Green Hills now drew from an expanding low-income Hmong refugee community. Meanwhile, due to gentrification in a nearby urban center that left many poor and working-class families priced out of neighborhoods where some had lived for generations, the percentage of African American students was rising steadily at the school.

In addition to his other dean duties, John led the school’s diversity efforts, at the request of the principal. “Some people are slow to adjust,” he had told me earlier that day. Then he smiled. “But I think it’s fantastic — a better learning experience for everybody.”

His enthusiasm seemed genuine. His office was a shrine to multiculturalism, with walls covered by colorful diversity posters. One, hanging just behind his desk, read “Unity through Diversity.”

John had reached out to me seeking advice about what he described as the stubborn diversity problem at Green Hills, which he couldn’t seem to resolve. “I’ve tried everything,” he said, exasperated.

So when he rushed by me, asking me to follow, I complied. We passed the art display and then

turned down another hallway. John ushered me through a set of double doors into the cafeteria.

“Here,” he whispered, “is the problem.” In front of us sat a small group of Hmong students eating lunch and chatting at a round table. John pointed inconspicuously at them and then gestured toward the left side of the cafeteria, where African American students sat at two tables, talking and eating.

“I don’t understand,” I said. “What’s the problem?”

“Can’t you see?” he whispered. “The problem is that the students of color are segregating themselves.”

I scanned the cafeteria again, then turned to John. “I see one table of Hmong students, two tables of African American students and more than a dozen tables filled almost entirely with white students.”

John looked at me, puzzled.

“Is it possible that the white students are segregating themselves?” I asked.

He rescanned the room. “I’ve never seen it that way,” he said.

I appreciated his candor and humility. “Your willingness to acknowledge that,” I told him, “is the most important tool in your diversity tool belt.”



We spent the rest of our time that day talking about what, in my view, were the most formidable barriers to John effectively leading diversity efforts at Green Hills. He and his colleagues didn't lack commitment, kindness or enthusiasm. Nor were they short on practical strategies or diversity programming ideas.

The biggest barrier at Green Hills when it came to diversity, as at almost every school with which



I've worked, came down to matters of equity literacy. Do I have the complex understanding of bias and inequity that allows me to make sense of diversity-related dynamics in sophisticated ways?

What I know for sure is that if we can't clearly see dynamics, we can't effectively respond to them. As a result, we risk doing more harm than good. Perhaps we expect students of color, lesbian and gay youth, or transgender students to join our celebrations of diversity while we fail to adequately address the ways they feel marginalized in our schools. Maybe we pour resources into recruiting teachers of color but refuse to allocate sufficient resources to ensuring that we are recruiting them into a working environment free of racial bias.

We heard a lot about that alienation a couple weeks later during a series of focus groups we had organized so that John and other folks at Green Hills could hear from the students. While John and his colleagues celebrated diversity, their Hmong and African American students, on average, felt invisible in the curriculum, were frustrated with teachers who ignored racially tinged teasing and were unsure whom they could trust with their concerns.

John began to realize that enthusiasm was not enough. Without deeper understanding, his intentions were misguided.

Equity literacy is that deeper understanding. It begins with the willingness to see what we might be conditioned not to see. It begins with the humility to

“ He believed, mistakenly, that the goal was racial unity. But there is no real racial unity without racial equity. ”

This was the view that John, a well-intentioned and diversity-minded dean, was taking. Despite his good intentions, his initial reaction was to blame his most alienated students for a dynamic that existed because they felt alienated. It didn't occur to him that what he saw as self-segregation might actually be a symptom of the racially charged atmosphere of the school.

He believed, mistakenly, that the goal was racial unity. But there is no real racial unity without racial equity.

consider our and our colleagues' culpability.

Say, for example, we notice a trend of lower-income parents attending family-involvement functions at our school at lower rates than their wealthier peers. How do we interpret what we see? Do we assume those parents must not care about their kids' education? If so, we are misinterpreting. For decades, researchers have found that that all parents, regardless of wealth, care deeply about their kids' education. Do we have the equity literacy, then, to step back and ask some deeper questions?

For example, do we arrange opportunities for family involvement in ways that are accessible to parents who likely work evening hours without paid leave? Do we bear in mind that many low-income families don't have access to transportation and struggle to afford child care? Have we done everything possible to ensure that low-income parents experience our school as welcoming and affirming? When we start considering these sorts of questions, we are practicing a higher form of diversity.

After the focus groups, John and I talked through some deeper diversity questions. Had the school done enough and the right kinds of professional development to ensure it was an affirming, equitable place for every student? Had he considered the more subtle ways in which the Hmong and African American students were being alienated at the school? To what extent had teachers been prepared to develop inclusive curricula and to talk openly about the bias various groups of students were experiencing?

As I explained to John, schools that make the greatest progress related to diversity embrace an approach that is grounded in equity literacy — in strengthening every community member's understanding of equity and inequity. Celebrating diversity is not enough. Cultural competence is a troublingly low bar. We must strive for more.

To grow beyond these approaches and embrace equity literacy, we begin not with a binder full of practical strategies but with a deeper commitment to strengthening our understanding. We allow a deeper understanding of diversity to guide our practice.

Below I share five questions similar to the sorts of questions I asked John. I often use these and similar questions as measuring sticks to help teachers and administrators reflect on their diversity efforts.

I invite you to consider your own diversity efforts through these questions. Each is followed by a nudge toward equity literacy.

Five Questions for Equity Literacy

1

What are the objectives of my diversity efforts? The goal of these efforts should be creating more equity, which requires me to directly address inequity and bias. If I can't explain how they are correlated with greater equity, I need to reevaluate my efforts.

2

Who or what are my diversity efforts intended to "fix"? Are they designed, like efforts to convince low-income families to care more about their kids' education, to fix the most marginalized people in my community or to fix the conditions that marginalize people in my community? If it's the former, my efforts are probably doing more harm than good and should be reconsidered.

3

Am I putting more resources into diversity programming — multicultural arts-and-crafts fairs or diversity assemblies — than into real conversations about issues like racism, economic inequality, sexism, homophobia and ableism? Diversity programming generates positive experiences only if I have the will and the skill to invest in real conversations about important issues.

4

Is my school's diversity professional development built around simplistic diversity approaches, like cultural competence, or around building the community's equity literacy? Good diversity PD should involve cultivating the four skills of equity literacy: recognizing inequity and bias, responding to inequity and bias, redressing inequity and bias, and cultivating equity.

5

Is diversity woven into my curriculum in sophisticated ways or in tokenistic ways? A diversity-infused curriculum should cultivate equity literacy in students so that they can apply their knowledge about diversity to issues affecting their communities. ■