

CARING & AFFIRMING EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENTS



Welcome to Equity Digest! This newsletter is for education stakeholders (e.g. community members, caregivers) who have an interest in supporting educational equity in their school communities. What is educational equity? Educational equity can be defined as beliefs, actions, and policies that enable all students to have access to and participate in quality learning environments and experience successful outcomes. Each Equity Digest explains the concepts and findings of the latest academic research surrounding a particular equity-focused topic. The intent of this periodical is to relay equity concepts and supporting research, “digesting” key findings so you can draw informed conclusions. The Digest also offers ways that you can advance equitable practices in your school community. Enjoy!

In this *Equity Digest*, we explore the components of caring and affirming educational communities for historically marginalized students and families, as well as considerations for creating the type of educational community in which all students thrive. As you will discover, a caring and affirming educational community empowers students and families and creates a safe and inclusive environment where all students thrive.

Get Informed

[Caring & Affirming Educational Communities Can Disrupt Marginalization & Harm](#)

[School Can be a Place of Institutional Harm and Marginalization](#)

Students spend a large portion of their weekdays in schooling environments (Illinois State Board of Education, 2020; National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.); if the environment is hostile and dehumanizing (Skelton, 2020), as you can imagine, it has a variety of negative effects on student confidence and comfort.

If you are a member of a **historically marginalized group** (students of Color, students with disabilities, LGBTQ+ students, students living in disinvested communities, non-Christian students, transnational students), odds are you've been subjected to adverse effects at school, such as **macroaggressions**: zero tolerance discipline policies (Allen, Scott, & Lewis, 2013), disproportionate suspensions, and even a greater likelihood of incarceration—also known as the “school-to-prison pipeline” (Allen, Scott, & Lewis, 2013; Ferguson, 2010; Jackson, Thorius, & Kyser, 2016) and **microaggressions** (Pierce, 1970). Microaggressions—frequent identity-based insults that add up to a daily stream of hostilities and oppression—can include experiences like constant mispronunciation of one's name (Kohli & Solórzano, 2012) and being told one “speaks well” for someone “like them” (Allen, Scott, & Lewis, 2013).



For historically marginalized groups of students, school can be a hostile and harmful environment where real threats of physical and psychological violence (Allen, Scott, & Lewis, 2013) are a part of daily life. If the message that you were “less than” was reinforced every day, would you want to come to that environment? How would you feel about learning in spaces like these? This is why it is important to be intentional about creating a caring and affirming educational community for historically marginalized students; this means creating a place that honors historically marginalized students' lived experiences and cultures, centering their identities in curriculum, discourse, and instruction. An affirming and caring educational environment is where all students are welcome. Caring and affirming learning spaces are **culturally responsive**, and it's important. Here's why.

A Caring and Affirming Educational Community Defined

The components of a caring and affirming educational community are quite simple—mutual respect among all school community stakeholders and the cultivation of positive relationships between them (National Association of Young Children, 2016). In a caring and affirming educational community, school is a **safe and inclusive** environment “for students, their families, and teachers to learn and grow” (Huskins, Sanborn, Jackson, Skelton, & Thorius, 2020, p. 2). These educational environments should feel liberatory—not oppressive (Freire, 1970a, 1970b, 1978), where students are encouraged to exercise their critical thinking skills and historically marginalized students' cultural histories and cultural practices are honored (Lazzell, Huskins, Jackson, Skelton, King Thorius, 2019). In an affirming and caring educational environment, all school community stakeholders are involved in mutual affirmation of each other's lived experiences, and collaboration and idea sharing are encouraged (Durakoglu, Bicer, & Zabun, 2013).

How to Ensure a Caring and Affirming Educational Community

At the heart of a caring and affirming educational community is the cultivation of positive relationships throughout the educational community (Dermody, 2003; Garza, 2009; Gootman, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paris & Alim, 2014). All identities are respected, and curriculum is rigorous and responsive regardless of ability, gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, or religion (Dermody, 2003; Garza, 2009; Gay, 2018; Paris & Alim, 2014). Students should feel physically and emotionally safe in the learning community (Johnson & Thomas, 2009; Lundy & Swartz, 2013), and encouraged to participate in and have ownership in their own schooling experience (Dermody, 2003; Pohan, 2003).

Why You Should Care

Caring & Affirming Educational Communities are Culturally Responsive

Cultivation of Relationships in a Caring and Affirming Educational Community Ensures a Safe and Inclusive Environment for Learning

Caring educational communities should be affirming, sending the message to students that they are intelligent and capable learners, encouraging them to be curious and question take-it-for-granted norms. The best way to do that is to provide physical and emotional security. Acceptance and the valuing of cultural diversity falls in line with this type of environment, where students can express themselves and feel free to take pride in their identities and cultures (Allen & FitzGerald, 2010; Cabello & Terrell, 1994; Ellerbrock, Abbas, Diccio, Denmon, JSabella, & Hart, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Lundy & Swartz, 2013, National Association of Young Children, 2016). Thus, a safe and inclusive environment is also a **culturally responsive** environment, where individual identities are supported and encouraged as students have the freedom of expression—with a cultivation of togetherness and communalism in the learning environment. Relationships built on trust are essential to the process of creating such an environment (Allen & FitzGerald, 2017; Ellerbrock, et al., 2015), something that is often missing in traditional education environments for historically marginalized students (Ennis & Mccauley, 2002; Van Meale & Van Houtte, 2011).

The Challenges of Online Educational Environments

In the COVID-19 pandemic era of distance learning, student-teacher relationships can feel more distant and strained (Miller, 2018; Wilkins, 2014) by the nature of the

virtual classroom. There is actual physical distance, which can create emotional distance as well. However, just because the school community is online doesn't mean that meaningful, trusting relationships can't be cultivated. For example, creating online space in virtual classrooms for open discussions between students and teachers can encourage students to feel more comfortable in voicing their opinions, frustrations, and needs with confidence (Miller, 2018; Wilkins, 2014), essential to mental health in the pandemic environment, both for students and for teachers. Even in the virtual space, teachers can signal to students that they are valued by listening to their input and integrating their feedback into classroom practices, policies, and learning experiences.

Caring and Affirming School Communities Acknowledge the Complexities of Historically Marginalized Students: Recognizing Intersectionality

When the school community affirms and appreciates cultural diversity (Cabello & Terrell, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 1995), a cascade of affirming events occurs for students: students feel valued, which builds pride in their cultures, and then boosts self-esteem. This greater self-confidence then directly reflects back into students' overall quality of learning.

Intersectionality is defined as “the ways in which social, economic, and political identity-based systems of oppression and privilege connect, overlap, and influence one another” (Crenshaw, 1989; Jackson et al., 2018, p. 2). Multiple, compounding oppressions have a huge impact on the lives of students with multiple historically marginalized identities. When this intersectionality is recognized and honored by educators and other school community stakeholders, students feel affirmed and less alone in their struggles. They feel understood, and this understanding can build trust in relationships. Students feel valued for their complex identities—an external recognition of themselves as whole human beings with complex lives. They feel welcomed into an environment inhabited by people who seek to understand their lived

experiences and who are on their side as they face their daily struggles (Cabello & Terrell, 1994; Jackson et al., 2020; Skelton, 2020).

One of the key components of an affirming and caring educational community is understanding intersectionality and using approaches to eliminate barriers to learning opportunities that account for students' multiple marginalized identities. For example, creation of a caring and affirming educational community in your context may mean instituting a STEM equity program that not only addresses ways in which girls are discouraged in STEM-related classes, but also attends to how students of Color are discouraged in those classes. A program that purposefully focuses on addressing race and gender-based intersectionality will have a better success rate in ensuring STEM-related learning opportunities for girls of Color compared to an equity program focused on girls alone or on students of Color alone. This example is at the heart of an effort of attending to intersectionality.

Moving Forward

School Community Stakeholders Can Support the Creation of Caring & Affirming Educational Communities

In this *Equity Digest*, we've explored the key components of a caring and affirming educational environment. Here are some considerations for creating the type of educational community in which all students thrive:

Critical Self-Reflection Helps School Community Stakeholders Better Understand Their Power and Privilege

Critical self-reflection involves examining your biases and recognizing the privileges afforded to you because of your identities in order to learn more about how you navigate the world and contribute to its inequities. Critical self-reflection can help you realize that others, because of their identities, have been prevented from accessing the same opportunities and

resources and therefore don't have some of the privileges that you have. This awareness can help you better understand the lived experiences and struggles, as well as resilience, of historically marginalized students and families (Jackson et al., 2020).

Critical self-reflection can cause discomfort and dissonance—it is important that one “remains vigilant and present, to demonstrate commitment to advocacy—no matter how it may feel” (Jackson, et al., 2020, p. 6). Critical self-reflection is a cycle of continuous learning and growth; it must be applied to your daily experiences if you want to truly seek to understand yourself and others. Critical self-reflection and self-awareness are key to that understanding (Huskins, et al., 2020).

Actively & Critically Listening to Historically Marginalized Students and Families Helps Create a Caring and Affirming Educational Community

Listening to historically marginalized students and families is essential to the creation of a caring classroom community (Huskins, et al., 2020) and affirming educational environment—they are the experts of their own reality. This type of environment signals to a person that they are seen, understood, supported, and are appreciated for the assets they bring into learning spaces and the school community.



Collaboration is Essential to Creating a Caring and Affirming Educational Community

Within-classroom collaboration is important to honor student voice, to encourage respect, and to create a sense of ownership for students. Within-school community collaboration is important in order to center and understand the needs of students. Everyone within the educational community wants what is best for students (Huskins, et al., 2020). In collaborating with

parents and caregivers, school community stakeholders can better understand the family and cultural environments that make the greatest impact in students' lives—the home life and its context. By collaborating with students and their families, everyone in the educational community works together for the benefit of the students.

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About the Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center

The mission of the Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center is to ensure equity in student access to and participation in high quality, research-based education by expanding states' and school systems' capacity to provide robust, effective opportunities to learn for all students, regardless of and responsive to race, sex, and national origin, and to reduce disparities in educational outcomes among and between groups. The Equity by Design briefs series is intended to provide vital background information and action steps to support educators and other equity advocates as they work to create positive educational environments for all children. For more information, visit <http://www.greatlakesequity.org>.

Recommended Citation: Lazzell, D. R., Huskins, K., Jackson, R. G., Skelton, S. M., & Thorius, K. A. K., (2020). Caring & affirming educational environments. *Equity Digest*. Midwest and Plains Equity Assistance Center (MAP EAC).

Disclaimer

Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center is committed to the sharing of information regarding issues of equity in education. The contents of this practitioner brief were developed under a grant from the U.S. Department of Education (Grant S004D110021). However, these contents do not necessarily represent the policy of the Department of Education, and you should not assume endorsement by the federal government.



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