

## UNDERSTANDING INTERSECTIONALITY IS CRUCIAL FOR SUSTAINING LEARNING 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!

### Get Informed

#### When Systems of Oppression Compound & Interact

In this issue of *Equity Digest*, we explore why it is important for educators to understand the concept of intersectionality. Educators must understand the myriad ways in which their students experience the world in order to inform culturally responsive and sustaining practices in the classroom. In this manner, they can better serve their students and ensure an equitable, responsive education for all.

### Understanding Identity

Social identity is defined as a person’s sense of who they are based upon their group membership(s) (McLeod, 2018). People with certain social identities have faced oppression, exclusion, and mistreatment throughout history—these are known as historically marginalized identities. Minoritized groups are socially constructed groups based on identity markers (e.g. gender, race, dis/ability, etc.) that as a result of systemic bias have less power or representation compared to other members or groups in society.



Intersectionality is defined as the ways in which systems of oppression and privilege connect and influence each other, resulting in the compounding of prejudicial treatment of individuals having multiple historically marginalized identities (Crenshaw, 1989), as well as creating new forms of discrimination (Jackson, Coomer, Sanborn, Dagli, Martinez Hoy, Skelton, & Thorius, 2018). When we say systems of oppression, we are talking about how social, economic, and political systems have historically favored some based on their identities, while marginalizing others.

### **Intersectionality & Student Engagement**

While diversity is often thought of as racial/ethnic diversity, true diversity means a broad array of identities are included (Jackson, Coomer, Dagli, Skelton, Kyser, & Thorius, 2017). In education as in society at large, status quo policies, practices, and structures reflect the cultural norm most often demonstrated by cis-male, White, heterosexual, non dis/abled, and Christian people. What if students don't see themselves in the status quo? How do you think they feel about school?

Learning is deepened when instruction is relevant to all students, as well as if students feel that their teachers truly understand them and are making an authentic effort to get to know them as people and to include them in learning activities. Educators and

stakeholders must recognize their students' intersectionality--how racism, sexism, classism, and other "isms" operate together to create complex, overlapping systems of oppressions that both exacerbate the impact of discriminatory practices and also create new areas of discrimination (Kyser, 2017).

Students are more likely to engage in an educational environment where they are felt, understood, and heard, and where learning is applicable to their daily lives, successes, and struggles. It is essential for educators and stakeholders to understand intersectionality such that they understand the needs of their students, and work to create learning environments where all students feel understood and valued—where all students want to engage in learning.

### **Understanding the History of Intersectionality is Important**

Learning and comprehending the history behind the concept of intersectionality is important in order to understand what often happens to students with multiple, historically marginalized identities—identity erasure (Jackson et al, 2018). Before the appearance of intersectionality in scholarly literature, Sojourner Truth, who was born into slavery, escaped and became an abolitionist and women's rights activist, addressed the issue in her speech at the 1851 Women's Rights Convention in Akron, Ohio, "Ain't I a Woman," where she relays how Black women are treated very differently compared to White women, at the intersections of gender, race, and class (Zwier, Grant, & Zwier, 2014; Jackson et al, 2018).

Intersectionality as an area of study has roots in critical legal studies and Black feminism, as well as Critical Race Theory (Jackson et al, 2018). In 1989, Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term to explain inequitable legal protections for Black women, although there were legal protections for Black people (but only Black men), as well as women (but in reality only White women) (Jackson et al, 2018). Other Female Scholars of Color, including bell hooks (1981), Patricia Hill Collins (1990), Gloria Anzaldúa (1987), and many more, expanded and expounded upon the concept of intersectionality as it related to the intersection of race and gender, and how sex discrimination and exclusion was compounded for Women of Color. Over time, the concept of intersectionality broadened to include other historically marginalized identities as well (Collins & Blige, 2016; Gillborn, 2015; Jackson et al, 2018).

### **Understanding Intersectionality in the Context of Education**

U.S. education discourse is not responsive to how students holding multiple marginalizing social identities experience intersectionality in school and how it shapes their learning (Chavous, Rivas-Drake, Smalls, Griffin, & Cogburn, 2008). Educators need to become aware of how students possessing multiple marginalized social identities are affected by educational inequities.

### **Intersectionality is Not the Same As Multiple Identities**

In popular discourse, intersectionality is often misunderstood. Some have used the term to mean having multiple social identities such as, being male, White, and middle class. However, this is a misuse of the concept. Intersectionality is specific to

the ways in which having multiple *historically marginalized* identities compounds the prejudicial treatment and inequities experienced by an individual with those identities. It is not about having multiple personal characteristics or even multiple social identities; intersectionality is about having multiple identities that have historically been and are presently discriminated against in society, such as being woman with a dis/ability.

### Interrogating Power & Privilege

It is the responsibility of educators, administrators, and education stakeholders to explore their own power and privilege in relation to minoritized students—their positionality—in order to comprehend how their own identities affect their interactions with these students (Alcoff, 1988; Maher & Tetreault, 1993; Takacs, 2003; Jackson et al, 2018). It's also of vital importance to ascertain the complex oppressions experienced by students with multiple historically marginalized identities in order to grasp the discrimination they encounter in society and at school. By better understanding students' lived experiences and needs, we can better ensure that all students have an equitable opportunity to learn and succeed.

## Why You Should Care

### Culturally Responsive Practices Attend to Students' Intersectionality

#### Attending to Intersectionality Fosters an Inclusive School Environment

Culturally responsive and sustaining practices recognize each student as a unique individual full of potential, while respecting and honoring their

cultures, and centering historically marginalized identities. When educators engage in culturally responsive and sustaining practices, they attend to students' intersectionality, understanding that race, gender, sexual identity, dis/ability, language, religion, national origin, and class work together and compound upon each other in different and unique ways (Jackson et al, 2018). When intersectionality is understood and appreciated, teaching practices become more holistic and inclusive (Waitoller & Thorius, 2016).

An example of intersectionality is the treatment of students of Color (a marginalized group) who also identify as LGBTQ+ (another group that is marginalized in our society). Research finds that Black LGBTQ+ students were found to experience higher frequencies of victimization based upon race/ethnicity and sexual orientation than individuals who are White and LGBTQ+ (Kosciw, Greytak, Giga, Villenas, & Danischewski, 2015). If one understands intersectionality, then one might come to the conclusion that the ally club at school may not be enough support if it is mostly White individuals. In addition, one would realize that the bullying and harassment policy needs to be expanded to include race/ethnicity-based harassment of LGBTQ+ individuals. You may also understand when LGBTQ+ students of Color walk out over a protest of discipline disproportionality. If you know that they face greater rates of bullying and harassment than White LGBTQ+ students, then LGBTQ+ students of Color may have higher rates of discipline from trying to protect themselves, which is being seen as a retaliation.

As you can see from this example, intersectionality is complex. By building your understanding of intersectionality, you will be better able to recognize those policies and practices that discriminate and oppress students who possess multiple historically marginalized identities.



#### Students Engage When Their Intersectionality is Appreciated

When you attend to intersectionality, you are recognizing that each student with multiple historically marginalized identities is an individual, and that they are subjected to multiple interacting and compounding systemic oppressions.

#### Disrupting the Deficit Perspective

Traditional conversations around disparities in education are focused on outcomes (Coomer, Jackson, Kyser, Skelton, & Thorius, 2017), and the blame is often placed squarely upon groups of students and families. Attending to students' intersectionality can widen the equity lens and disrupt these deficit conversations and methods of analysis (Jackson et al, 2018). Taking into account intersectionality enables educators to focus on the systemic barriers that contribute to problematic outcomes associated with particular students or student groups.

## Examples & Effects of Intersectionality

Earlier, we gave the example of the unique experiences and oppressions experienced by LGBTQ+ students of Color. Here, we provide more examples of multiple minoritized identities and the compounding and unique oppressions these students face:

**Race + Gender:** Girls of Color face higher risks of suspension and expulsion (Morris, 2015). While Black girls reported the bullying and harassment of all girls, they felt greater insecurity through their fear of being penalized with Zero Tolerance policies for defending themselves against harassment (Crenshaw, Ocen, & Nanda, 2015; Jackson et al, 2018).

**Race + Sexuality:** Students of Color who identify as LGBTQ+ experience more bullying and harassment that targeted their race/ethnicity than White students who identify as LGBTQ+ (Jackson et al, 2018; Kosciw, Greytak, Giga, Villenas, & Danischewski, 2015). Students of Color who identify as LGBTQ+ are also often all lumped together in a single group, but there are different races, ethnicities, religions, communities, and cultures within this group; even within a single ethnic group, student experiences vary greatly (“GLESN,” n.d.; Jackson et al, 2018).

**Race + Dis/ability:** Race, ethnicity or national origin, language, and poverty are all contributors to disproportionate representation in special education (Jackson et al, 2018). Showing that racism interacts with ableism (discrimination against dis/abled individuals), Waitoller and Thorius (2016) provided a cross-pollination framework of culturally responsive

teaching practices and Universal Design for Learning in order to provide an intersectional approach to teaching and learning that attends to both race and dis/ability.

### Not Attending to Intersectionality Further Marginalizes Minoritized Students

Educators and education stakeholders need to attend to minoritized students' intersectionality. They must work to enact policies and practices toward equity and social justice, challenging the status quo, power, and privilege that has marginalized and continues to marginalize some of their students. In addition, educators should foster a school environment where historically marginalized students are encouraged to challenge and feel comfortable challenging the status quo. Not attending to their intersectionality, ignoring minoritized students' negative experiences, acts to further marginalize them (Jones & Wijeyesinghe, 2011).



## Moving Forward

### Understanding Intersectionality: Questions to Consider

So where do we go from here? How do educators attend to intersectionality if there is no guide book? Here, we adapt some domains of practice suggested by Jones & Wijeyesinghe (2011, pp. 13-14) in order to get educators and stakeholders thinking about what it means to be responsive to the intersectionality that students possessing multiple marginalizing identities face (Jackson et al, 2018).

#### Centering the Experiences of People of Color

##### Consider:

1. How do lesson plans and the classroom/school environment regularly center Students of Color?
2. How have the lived experiences of Students of Color been acknowledged and affirmed at school?
3. How have instruction, curriculum, and the classroom/school environment not valued or restricted the voices of Students of Color?

#### Recognizing & Affirming Intersectionality

##### Consider:

1. How will educators and administrators attend to minoritized students' intersectionality in lessons, curriculum, school environment, socialization, and discipline?
2. How will educators attend to students' intersectionality when reflecting upon and discussing current events?
3. How will stakeholders, educators, and administrators critically self-reflect upon their power

and privilege in relation to the intersectionalities of students?

## Interrogating Power, Privilege, and Inequity

### Consider:

How have stakeholders, educators, and administrators thought about how historical and current power structures oppress marginalized students?

How have stakeholders, educators, and administrators questioned power and privilege and how these function in the learning environment?

How have stakeholders, educators, and administrators considered how students' background and lived experiences affect their education?

## Encouraging Social Justice and Change

### Consider:

From a student's point of view, how have stakeholders, educators, and administrators created a school environment that promotes social justice and change?

How are social justice issues discussed at school and how are action plans established, followed through, and sustained?

How do stakeholders', educators', and administrators' attitudes, methods of discussing, and support of social justice issues take into account students' intersectionalities?

These questions require thoughtful and critical self-reflection, as well as reflection upon the inequities and power structures within the school and in

society. In essence, these questions may lead stakeholders toward a better understanding of what marginalized students face on a daily basis, and how the school and classroom environment supports or further marginalizes them.

In order to assure that all students succeed, we must acknowledge and respect everything about them—their multiple identities, their lived experiences, their backgrounds, inequities they face in and out of school. That is the true essence of a culturally responsive and sustaining learning environment. In cultivating and sustaining this type of school environment, we all succeed.

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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 Digest 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>.

## Disclaimer

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