

The Cultural Fair Conundrum: Choose Your Own Equitable Adventure

Setting: *In an urban middle school serving 7th and 8th graders, students come from a wide range of ethnic, racial, and cultural backgrounds, reflecting the broader diversity of the community. The school has long been recognized for its promotion of multiculturalism¹, often celebrating cultural holidays and incorporating literature from various cultures into the curriculum. However, beneath the surface, the school grapples with deeper issues of inclusion that affect students' day-to-day experiences and sense of belonging.*

Despite the outward promotion of diversity, the school's practices do not consistently reflect a truly inclusive environment. Students of Color, particularly Black, Latine, and students from Central American and Middle Eastern backgrounds, often feel that their voices are marginalized in classroom discussions and school decision-making.

Scenario: Every year, the school hosts a "Cultural Fair" where students are encouraged to showcase their heritage through food, clothing, music, and dance. While the event is intended to celebrate diversity, it tends to focus heavily on more well-known cultures, such as those from Western Europe and East Asia, which are better represented in the student body and community. This year, a group of students from Central American and Middle Eastern backgrounds feel that their cultures are underrepresented. When they propose to perform traditional dances and share food from their cultures, the organizing committee, led by a few white teachers, express concerns about time constraints and the unfamiliarity of these cultures to the broader school community. As a result, these students are given less time to present, and their booths are placed in less prominent areas of the fair.

On the day of the Fair, the students from underrepresented backgrounds notice that the booths for European and East Asian cultures are larger, more centrally located, and receive more attention from both students and teachers. Some of the Central American and Middle Eastern students feel excluded and disappointed by the lack of enthusiasm for their presentations. They overhear some teachers and students making comments about their cultures being "less interesting" or "too foreign." The students approach you to express this disappointment.

¹While there is nothing inherently wrong with multiculturalism, educators might focus on surface-level aspects like holidays, food, or festivals without addressing deeper, systemic issues such as inequity, privilege, or power dynamics (Banks & Banks, 2019). This superficial treatment can result in the trivialization of cultures rather than a meaningful understanding.

First, a note: What is the difference between intent and impact?

One's **intent** is typically driven by **goals that inform an action**. **Impact** is the resulting **effect of the action**. Sometimes, our goal-based actions are in misalignment with the effect of those actions. In these cases, it is important to consider how your actions were received, rather than focusing on what you *meant* to occur; resistance to [critical self-reflection](#) may reflect that the motives of your intent were self-serving, rather than for the benefit of others.

You remind the students that they had lovely presentations and should feel proud they were able to represent their culture.

Intent:

- You believe you are being supportive through validating the students' cultural presentations by complimenting them on their hard work.

Impact:

- Praise is temporary; the students may feel good in the moment but may still feel disheartened and less valued by the school community in the aftermath. Their sense of belonging is undermined, and they may become less engaged in school activities as a result (Allen et al., 2018).

Critical Reflection toward Becoming a Culturally Inclusive Educator

How can schools address and rectify inequities when they arise, especially when they are rooted in long-standing traditions?



You tell the students that the current format of the Cultural Fair reflects the interests of most students, so this is why some showcases are longer than others.

Intent:

- You are in support of the principal, whom you realize is caught between addressing the concerns of the marginalized students and maintaining the support of the broader school community—so you hope this explanation satisfies everyone.

Impact:

- The unequal treatment at the Cultural Fair reinforces feelings of alienation and perpetuates stereotypes that certain cultures are more valuable than others (Banaji et al., 2021). The school's reputation as a multicultural environment may be damaged as word spreads about the inequitable treatment.

Critical Reflection toward Becoming a Culturally Inclusive Educator

What steps can teachers and principals take to create more inclusive environments that go beyond surface-level celebrations of diversity?



You raise the issue with the organizing committee and the school administration, advocating for a more equitable approach to the Cultural Fair, suggesting that all cultures be given equal time and space, and that the event include educational components to teach all students about less familiar cultures. To supplement everyone's learning, you offer [Culturally Responsive and Sustaining Learning Environments](#) as reading, in addition to [Leadership Considerations for Fostering a Thriving, Diverse, Culturally Responsive Educator Workforce](#) to help strengthen the conversation around the importance of fostering and maintaining safe spaces for all students.

Intent:

- You want to ensure that the students are both properly heard and that actions follow their concerns, with the understanding that change sometimes means conflict and discomfort. You affirm the broader discussions about how the school approaches multiculturalism, and whether it truly values all cultures equitably, as a necessary journey.

Impact:

- The students feel acknowledged and affirmed. The principal acknowledges the concerns and works with teachers, students, and parents to redesign the Cultural Fair. They ensure that all cultures are given equal representation and that the event includes educational workshops to foster a deeper understanding—which extends to the classroom environment. Finally, addressing current and potential discriminatory acts are in alignment with Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964² to ensure equity for minoritized students.

²Prohibits discrimination on the grounds of race, color, or national origin in programs and activities receiving federal financial assistance. This includes schools and educational institutions, ensuring that students from diverse ethnic backgrounds are treated equitably.

Action Steps to Becoming a Culturally Inclusive Educator

- Commit to ongoing professional development for staff to become culturally responsive and sustaining educators. Work with other educators to share effective strategies for teaching in culturally diverse classrooms.
- Regularly reflect on their own cultural backgrounds, biases, and assumptions.
- Highlight and affirm the cultural diversity of the classroom through curriculum, discussions, and classroom decorations. Incorporating different cultural perspectives into lessons can make all students feel valued.
- Create a classroom culture where students feel safe to express their identities and share their cultural experiences.
- Use teaching materials that reflect the diversity of the students' backgrounds. Ensure that the curriculum includes perspectives and histories from various cultures and communities.
- Foster strong relationships with students' families. This can include home visits, regular communication, and involving families in school activities.

Meet the Author

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Recommended citation: Jackson, R. G., Thorius, K. A. K., Roscigno, R., & Skelton, S. M. (2024). The cultural fair conundrum: Choose your own equitable adventure. *Equity Express* [Newsletter]. Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center.

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