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# Teaching Towards Understandings of Intersectionality



**Nobody ever helps me into carriages or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man— when I could get it— and bear the lash as well! And ain't I a woman?**

**- Sojourner Truth**



## Did You Know

### Intersectionality is *Not* the Same as Having Multiple Identities

In this edition of *Equity Dispatch*, we seek to emphasize the criticality of intersectionality, or the ways in which social, economic, and political identity-based systems of oppression and privilege connect, overlap, and influence one another (Crenshaw, 1989), as a powerful construct and tool for strengthening [culturally responsive and sustaining practices](#) in the educational environment. We offer its importance because when we collapse students' identities into separate categories (e.g. English Language Learners, LGBTQ+, Black/African American), we run the risk of not attending to the complexities and oppressions that exist at the nexus of these diverse student groups. Attending to the myriad ways in which students' multiple, historically marginalized identities interact to shape their unique existences can: 1) begin to illuminate ways to deepen students' learning by increasing contents' relevance; and 2) increase educators' understandings of their students.

It is easy to fall into surface-level ways of defining *diversity*; in the U.S., diversity is applied as a proxy for race, and often reduced to a Black/White binary. Diversity, then, is conflated with racial representation requirements, conceptualized as the infusion of Black and Brown children into White spaces that remain unchanged in terms of norms and power structures. In contrast, authentic representations of diversity are inclusive, broad, and multidimensional (e.g. race/ethnicity, sex/sexual orientation, dis/ability) (Jackson, Coomer, Dagli, Skelton, Kyser, & Thorius, 2017).

It is essential to recognize the complexity of intersectionality in the educational context; in the U.S. in particular, education discourse is reflective of the dominant culture (e.g. White, cis-male, heterosexual, non-dis/abled), and typically not responsive to the countless ways marginalized students' identities shape their learning experiences (Chavous, Rivas-Drake, Smalls, Griffin, & Cogburn, 2008). As such, when educational experiences do not account for students' intersectionality, it propagates educational inequities. The students we serve are not a monolith; as educators we are committed to an [equitable, responsive education for all](#).

#### **Intersectionality: A Brief History**

Obtaining an understanding of the inception of intersectionality is essential to understanding the consequences of holistic identity erasure, which often occurs for those who possess multiple, historically marginalized identities. The idea that one's intersectionality converges and complicates one's treatment in the world predates intersectionality's appearance in law and academia. The foremother of intersectionality, abolitionist and women's rights activist Sojourner Truth's politically charged speech "Ain't I a Woman" in 1851 was an articulation of the differential treatment she and other Black women received, opposite their White counterparts. Sojourner Truth's speech called attention to the intersection of gender, race, and class (enslaved), illustrating that the sentiments surrounding the supposed gentle treatment of women did not apply to her, or women who looked like her (Zwier, Grant, & Zwier, 2014).

Often co-opted in popular culture, intersectionality does *not* refer simply to one's multiple identity markers (e.g. sister, father, cousin, etc.), but is distinguished by the interaction, and subsequent prejudicial treatment, facilitated by historical systemic oppression. With its roots in critical legal studies and Black feminism, and eventually settling within Critical Race Theory, Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term "intersectionality" in 1989 to explain the ways in which Black women were excluded from legal protections for Black people that only included Black men, as well as protections for women that either tacitly or explicitly only included White women. The concept, however, was innovated by many other female scholars of Color (see: bell hooks (1981), Patricia Hill Collins (1990), and Gloria Anzaldúa (1987), to name a few). Although situated specifically in law, the central idea of intersectionality was that the exclusionary nature of sex discrimination, while focusing on issues that were discriminatory for women, had not acknowledged how those issues were compounded by race for Black women. Intersectionality, as a concept, is one that belongs in education discourse if we are to be sure we are authentically accounting for the histories of marginalization of students with multiple historically marginalized identities in schools. This pertains to curricular materials, teaching methods, and schooling structures that commit to equity and center historically marginalized perspectives and experiences.

As intersectionality made its way into academia, its roots in Black feminism provided a bridge towards reconceptualization; scholars soon began to expand its definition to include other minoritized identities, in addition to being a Black woman (see Collins & Blige, 2016, and Gillborn, 2015, for examples). This expansion provided a platform for exploring myriad ways individuals' location at the nexus of multiple minoritized identities are affected by systemic oppression, and how people are perceived and treated as a result of those convergences.

Educators engaged in equity and social justice in education must explore [their own positionalities](#), or the ways in which their identities (e.g. Race/ethnicity, gender/expression, disability, etc.) affect their everyday relational interactions with students (Alcoff, 1988; Maher & Tetreault, 1993; Takacs, 2003). Relatedly, it is important to recognize how racism, sexism, classism, ableism, and other "-isms," operate together to create complex, overlapping systems of oppression that both exacerbate the impact of discriminatory practices, while creating new areas of discrimination.

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# Why It Matters

## School-Based Intersectional Approaches

Attending to students' intersectionality matters, particularly in the interrogation of so-called culturally responsive and sustaining practice literature—which becomes problematic (i.e. rigid, stereotypic, recipe-like) when it offers blanket and prescriptive solutions for educating particular groups of students. Educational methodology is ever evolving, as should we, to be sure we are employing the optimal approaches toward educational equity and justice.

Conversations surrounding disparities in education are often [centered on outcomes](#); this places onus on students and families, rather than focusing the lens on redressing systemic oppressions of people who are not members of dominant groups in society. Approaching and activating intersectionality-based analyses can serve to widen our lenses, disrupting deficit-oriented conversations and methods.

Educators are called to adjust practices that disaggregate social problems into discrete challenges facing specific groups. For example, this means recognizing that Black female/girl students' challenges do not rest solely on their Blackness or their gender identity—but is seated in the interaction of these two identities (for an example, see: [Within The Intersection: What Does It Mean to Be Black and A Young Woman in Mathematics Classrooms?](#) ). Shifting from hyper-focused interventions that remediate discrete skills, to equity work grounded in an understanding of how policies, structures, and interactions where race, gender, sexual identity, disability, language, religion, national origin, and class operate together, can move teaching practices away from limiting access and toward more inclusive and holistic learning opportunities that appreciate and have reverence for students' intersectionality (Waitoller & Thorius, 2016). Moreover, it requires educators consider the negative consequences students experience because of intersectional identity, which we touch on in the following examples.

**Race + Gender:** Literature suggests that Girls of Color face higher risks of suspension and expulsion for subjective behavioral infractions (see: *Pushout: The Criminalization of Black Girls in Schools* by Monique W. Morris, 2015, as an example). Similarly, in a study Black girls reported the failure of schools to intervene in the sexual harassment and bullying of girls overall, contributing to their insecurity at school (Crenshaw, Ocen, & Nanda, 2015). Participants reported zero-tolerance policies often exacerbated the sense of vulnerability experienced by Girls of Color because they feared they would be penalized for defending themselves against harassing behavior.

**Race + Sexuality:** Students of Color who identify as LGBTQ+ experience higher frequencies of victimization than White LGBTQ+ students based on race/ethnicity (Kosciw, Greytak, Giga, Villenas, & Danischewski, 2015). All students benefit from learning environments in which they are seen as a valuable person, and where their various identities, experiences, abilities and needs are taken into account. LGBTQ+ students of Color, like all students, are not a homogenous group; they represent a diverse range of race, ethnicity, religion, community and culture. Even within a particular ethnic group, student experiences may vary widely (“GLESN,” n.d.).

**Race + Dis/ability:** A student's race and ethnicity significantly influences the student's probability of being misidentified, misclassified, and inappropriately placed in special education programs (Annamma & Morrison, 2018). Research shows variables such as race, ethnicity or national origin, language and poverty have been cited as factors that play a role in disproportionate representation in special education (Gresham, Sugai, & Homer, 2001; Jackson, Thorius, & Kyser, 2016; Santamaría Graff & Kozleski, 2015; Thorius & Stephenson, 2012). In response, and in addition to, the literature, Waitoller and Thorius (2016) proposed a cross-pollination of [culturally responsive teaching practices](#), and [Universal Design for Learning](#). This framework provides an intersectional approach to curriculum by cross-pollinating culturally sustaining pedagogy, which has generally focused on student's racial identities, with Universal Design for Learning to explicitly account for students' dis/abilities. Moreover, Waitoller & Thorius (2016) demonstrated how ableism interacts with racism and vice versa, describing the relational history of these two social constructs and assert that justice-focused pedagogies work to abolish them, together.

### **Richness, Complexity, and Continual Examination**

Educators have the responsibility to not only become familiar with their students' backgrounds, but to also welcome students' examination and critique of status quo practices that are marginalizing to them, based on their intersectional identities. Ignoring this negates minoritized students' adverse experiences with power and privilege in the educational environment—(in)advertently becoming complicit in their oppression (Jones & Wijeyesinghe, 2011). Understanding the value of students' intersectionality is imperative—especially as we work to assist students and families in realizing the importance of co-creating learning spaces that are emancipatory, empowering, and equitable.



## **For Equity Now**

Complexity Means There is No Quick Fix

Intersectionality requires that equity-oriented educators rethink interventions for redressing systemic inequity. Proposed methods to co-creating a learning environment that is responsive to students' intersectionality requires complex approaches. It is important to note here that any approaches educators use must not be additive, but sustainable; students' identities deserve to be affirmed and authentically integrated into the whole educational environment, moving beyond lesson plans. In this, we must also pay homage to the inception of intersectionality, attending to the experiences of Black Woman and Girls, and their decentering/erasure in most educational discourse.

Jones and Wijeyesinghe (2011) explore the challenges and strategies when teaching students with respect for intersectionality; while remaining cognizant of the myriad ways students' identities necessitate attention to how their intersectionality affects their movement through the world. Following are a few domains of practice that facilitate preparedness (adapted from: Jones & Wijeyesinghe, 2011, pp. 13-14):

## **Centering the experiences of people of Color**

- How do your lessons center the lives of students of Color, daily?
- How have you authentically incorporated (i.e. not additively) lived experiences of students of Color into the educational environment?
- How might your lessons have silenced/constrained the voices of your students of Color?

## **Complicating identity**

- How will you account for multiple oppressed identities (e.g. by e.g. race/ethnicity, sex/sexual orientation, religion, gender, dis/ability) in lessons, curriculum, in the educational environment, facilitating social interaction, in discipline, etc.?
- How will you interrogate the partnership of intersectionality and current political events?
- How will you self-reflect on your own positionality and place(s) of power and privilege, in relation to the intersectionalities of your students?

## **Unveiling power in interconnected structures of inequality**

- In what ways have you considered how power structures are at play, intentionally or unintentionally, to oppress your marginalized students?
- How have you interrogated the notions of power and privilege in your educational space?
- In what ways have you considered the relationship between your students' socio-historical and cultural contexts and their education?

## **Promoting social justice/change**

- In what ways have you created a space in your educational environment that promotes social justice from the students' perspective?
- How are social justice issues examined, and plans-of-action sustained?
- How does your approach to social issues respect the intersectionality of your students?

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## Meet the Authors

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