

RECOGNIZING DIFFERENCE ≠ BEING DIVISIVE: WHY DISRUPTING OPPRESSION IS NECESSARY



[Image description: Graphic of side facial profiles of six people of varying racial/ethnic backgrounds and gender expressions.]

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

Talking About Racism Isn't Racist

If you've been watching the news or scrolling social media, you've no doubt seen the current debate over what should and shouldn't be taught in schools; particularly in relation to Critical Race Theory (CRT) (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017), race/racism, and the history of oppression in the U.S. Even though CRT is not being taught in K-12 curriculum, many people believe that even discussing race, racism, or other identities and oppressions in the classroom is divisive, that it'll somehow create/worsen racism, and that the

content itself is irrelevant to curriculum (Banerjee, 2021; Sanborn et al., 2021). In actuality, centering conversations around how race and racism has impacted history—especially racism in schooling—is *inclusive*. It allows for the stories and voices of historically marginalized¹ students, families, and education stakeholders to be elevated. It creates spaces for marginalized populations to hear and see themselves be [affirmed in the physical environment](#) (e.g., classroom environments)

¹E.g., people of Color, people from disinvested communities, LGBTQI+ people, people with dis/abilities, transnational people.

and in [the curriculum](#) (i.e., authentic, non-tokenized representations of marginalized populations) (Chavous et al., 2008; Skelton, 2020).



[Image description: Feminine-presenting, elementary-aged Black student, sitting in a classroom, smiling.]

But most importantly it:

- moves us towards collective and shared understandings of how we all move through the world
- explores how we are still affected by oppressive historical occurrences, and
- pushes us to stop talking about equity, and actually [be equitable through action](#).

What is CRT?

So we've heard CRT being tossed around in the media—but what is it exactly?

Beginning in law, CRT is a movement among activists and scholars that want to examine and transform the relationship between race, privilege, and power—and how it affects society. This includes areas like history, finance, physical environment, collective attitudes, and individuals' (sub)conscious (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Put simply: CRT is concerned about the origins of systems that have served to oppress historically marginalized groups. Its goal is not to be divisive, but rather highlight spaces and places that have, and continue to, oppress minoritized groups of people—and think about ways to disrupt those systems toward a collective betterment. For the purposes of this conversation, we are focused on minoritized students and families in schools.

Ignoring the very real realities of marginalized students as individuals, and as a collective, is counterintuitive to the safe and inclusive schooling environments we claim to be working towards (Chavous et al., 2008; Sanborn et al., 2021; Skelton, 2020). We erase the complexity of marginalized students' lived experiences by not

acknowledging their whole selves. However, through embracing multiple perspectives, you are sending the message that all students—but marginalized students in particular—have histories and stories that are just as important, rich, and impactful (Garland, 2021; Sanborn et al., 2021). As educational stakeholders, you have the agency to disrupt conversations that serve to silence marginalized students, [acting as accomplices](#) in the ongoing “debate” that continues to oppress them. Speaking up and out ensures you are part of creating, and not prohibiting, [safe and inclusive schools](#). Teaching an accurate history helps create the most robust and informed citizens who will run our country one day. Don't we want them to develop into inclusive, critical, accepting individuals?

Why You Should Care

Minoritized Students' Existences Deserve to Be Validated in All Ways

Historically marginalized students have been socialized into a schooling system that often harms and treats them as less-than for not fitting to dominant ways of being (e.g., White, cis-male, heterosexual, non-dis/abled, etc.), disrupting who they inherently are (Sanborn, 2021; Stovall & Annamma, 2021). This can look like not acknowledging LGBTQI+, BIPOC, or disability history in consistent and authentic ways—from the perspectives of individuals in those communities. It can also look like marginalized communities being presented in stereotypical ways in curriculum, or even in decorations



[Image description: Graphic of a masculine-presenting Black student reading a book, sitting next to a stack of books. The books spines read: scientists, lawyers, civil rights leaders, president, innovators, pilots, writers, astronauts, biologists, congresswomen, athletes.]

in classrooms and hallways. We can begin to address and disrupt these actions by fostering spaces for open communication in which we critically examine school policies and practices (Paris, 2017). By acknowledging that these policies and practices are often results of biases rooted in power and privilege (Moore et al., 2017; Sleeter, 2010), we can ask questions like:

- Who benefits from “business as usual” in schools?
- Who is being harmed at an excessive and unequal rate?

We can have these conversations, keeping ourselves informed to ensure we're helping to make sound decisions for all students to be able to thrive. Ultimately, we want educational equity to be the journey and the goal; we can't do that without providing an open platform for marginalized voices and realities (Gonzalez et al., 2009) to come to the center.

Not teaching accurate histories about race and racism doesn't make it less of a reality for everyone (i.e., color-neutral ways of being and doing promote erasure of minoritized peoples' lived experiences (Annamma et al., 2017)). Taken further, the racial tension that exists, particularly in this country, continues on because of avoidance. These truthful conversations benefit both minoritized communities and white people (and people who possess other dominant identities as well); Shuster (2018) states,

Reconciliation requires honest conversations about the nature of white privilege and its persistence... Ultimately, teaching the truth... will be just one step in the right direction, but an essential one. If we don't get the early history of our country right, we are unlikely to be equipped to do the heavy lifting necessary to bridge racial divides now and in the future. It is a moral necessity if we are to move the country forward toward healing... (p. 21)

Thus, the role of teaching accurate histories about race and racism can be healing, encouraging empathy towards enhancing social justice work (Cartabuke et al., 2017).

The focus on not centering marginalized voices, specifically regarding CRT and historically accurate information, is the real distraction (Sanborn et al., 2021). We are essentially debating which parts of history are valid; [implicit] biases of those in power continue to inform how we make decisions (Sanborn et al., 2019)—including who shows up [accurately] in the curriculum (Moore et al., 2015; Sleeter, 2010). History is current; meaning, we have not overcome or surpassed any of the issues that have/continue to oppress marginalized groups. If you have ever read history books and wondered what side of history you'd be on, now is the time to make that choice. Turn critical conversations into action, ensuring all students' existences are lifted and valued.

Moving Forward

Preparing to Converse and Disrupt

We've been talking about the importance of centering equity and validating marginalized peoples' histories in education. Where do you begin to educate yourself? How can you feel confident that you have all the information you need in order to be effective in conversations toward equity? Below are a few resources for you to read, and how to activate them (Sanborn et al., 2021).

Educate Yourself: How Do I Center Equity?

Make sure you keep yourself open to learning (and unlearning) about how and why inequity persists. It's essential to approaching conversations in a way that's meaningful—coupled with knowing the histories of certain inequities and oppressions, which will help give you context.

- [The Fundamentals of Educational Equity](#)

This *Equity Digest* provides a place to begin for education stakeholders as we review the fundamentals of educational equity and why it is so important in ensuring the success of all students.

- [Intersectionality is Crucial for Culturally Responsive and Sustaining Environments](#)

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.

Understand How Educators are Communicating their Purpose for Equity Work

Understanding educators' motivations for their equity work can better inform how you can be an informed accomplice, helping to ensure the equity conversation continues to be elevated in meaningful ways.

- [School Community Stakeholders as Allies & Accomplices: Playing a Role in Social Justice Advocacy](#)

In this issue of *Equity Digest*, we discuss two approaches of social justice advocacy, allyship and accomplice-ship, and how your actions determine whether you are an ally or an accomplice.

- [Teacher Position, Action, & Equity](#)

In this edition of *Equity Digest*, we discuss the unique position of teachers in classrooms and in society, take a closer look at the historical roots of teacher stereotypes and inequities, and discuss their role in change toward educational equity.

How Will You Be Sure Your Actions toward Equity are Productive?

Sure, you have a lot of conversations about what equity should look like in education—but in what ways have you acted to disrupt inequities? How can you be sure that you aren't doing more harm than good?

- [Authentic Social Justice Advocacy is a Lifestyle of Critical Action](#)

In this issue of *Equity Digest*, we explore the components of authentic social justice advocacy and discuss what it means to take critical action toward equity within the school community.

- [The Power of One, the Power of the Collective: Recommitting to Equity Work in Your School Community](#)

In this issue of *Equity Digest*, we explore why it is important for school community stakeholders to recommit to equity work. In order to further your mission, recommitment requires critical self-reflection and examination of one's own biases.



[Image description: Photo of a computer keyboard, with one key reading "disrupt." There is a phenotypically white person's finger hovering over it, ready to press the button.]

References

- Annamma, S. A., Jackson, D. D., & Morrison, D. (2017). Conceptualizing color-evasiveness: Using dis/ability critical race theory to expand a color-blind racial ideology in education and society. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 20(2), 147-162.
- Banarjee, A. (2021, June 12). *Why is critical race so divisive?* The Factual. <https://www.thefactual.com/blog/why-is-critical-race-theory-so-divisive/>
- Cartabuke, M., Westerman, J. W., Bergman, J. Z., Whitaker, B. G., Westerman, J., & Beekun, R. I. (2019). Empathy as an antecedent of social justice attitudes and perceptions. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 157(3), 605-615.
- Chavous, T. M., Rivas-Drake, D., Smalls, C., Griffin, T., & Cogburn, C. (2008). Gender matters, too: The influences of school racial discrimination and racial identity on academic engagement outcomes among African American adolescents. *Developmental Psychology*, 44(3), 637.
- Delgado, R., & Stefancic, J. (2017). *Critical race theory: An introduction* (3rd Ed.). New York University Press.
- Garland, S. (2021, January 25). *Can we teach our way out of political polarization?* The Hechinger Report. <https://hechingerreport.org/can-we-teach-our-way-out-of-political-polarization/>
- Gonzalez, N., Moll, L. C., & Amanti, C. (2009). *Funds of knowledge: Theorizing practices in households, communities, and classrooms*. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Moore, T. S., Jackson, R. G., Kyser, T. S., Skelton, S. M., & Thorius, K. A. K. (2017). Designing and delivering culturally responsive and sustaining curricula. *Equity Dispatch*. Great Lakes Equity Center (GLEC).
- Paris, D. (2017). On culturally sustaining teachers. *Equity by Design*. Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center (MAP EAC).
- Sanborn, E. K., Jackson, R. G., Moore, T. S., Skelton, S. M., & Thorius, K. A. K. (2019). Developing authentic socially-just spaces at the systemic level. *Equity Dispatch*. Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center (MAP EAC).
- Sanborn, E. K., Jackson, R. G., Thorius, K. A. K., & Skelton, S. M. (2021). Acknowledging difference and disrupting systemic oppression is inclusive, not divisive. *Equity Dispatch*. Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center (MAP EAC).
- Shuster, K. (2018). *Teaching hard history: American slavery*. Southern Poverty Law Center. https://www.splcenter.org/sites/default/files/tt_hard_history_american_slavery.pdf
- Skelton, S. M. (2020). Creating caring classroom communities through culturally responsive and sustaining lesson planning [Unpublished]. *EquiLearn Focus Session*. Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center (MAP EAC).
- Sleeter, C. E. (2010). Decolonizing curriculum. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 40(2), 193-204.
- Stovall, D., & Annamma, S. (2021, July 29). *Opinion: Using critical race theory to understand the backlash against it: Debates about whether or not critical race theory is taught in schools miss a larger point*. The Hechinger Report. <https://hechingerreport.org/opinion-using-critical-race-theory-to-understand-the-backlash-against-it/?fbclid=IwAR02fwrn9h8cpc42JbEod1o1Jlpns69TySdaiDoKmX-FjlzFgj3XaGzul8>

Meet the Authors

This December 2021 issue of *Equity Digest* was written and edited by: Robin G. Jackson, Erin K. Sanborn, Kathleen King Thorius, and Seena M. Skelton

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: Jackson, R. G., Sanborn, E. K., Thorius, K. A. K., & Skelton, S. M. (2021). Recognizing difference ≠ being divisive: Why disrupting oppression is necessary. *Equity Digest*. Midwest & 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.

A PROJECT OF  GREAT LAKES
EQUITY
CENTER

Great Lakes Equity Center
902 West New York St.
Indianapolis, IN 46202
317-278-3493 - glec@iupui.edu
glec.education.iupui.edu