

# GETTING STARTED WITH EDUCATIONAL EQUITY

TEN STEPS TO GET YOU ON THE RIGHT  
PATH TOWARDS LEADING EQUITY



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## MEET THE DIRECTOR



Sheldon L. Eakins, Ph.D. is the Director of the [Leading Equity Center](#) and host of the Leading Equity Podcast. With over a decade of years in education, he has served as a teacher, principal, and Director of Special Education.

Dr. Eakins has a passion for helping educators accomplish equitable practices in their schools. He has earned a B.S. degree in Social Science Education, a M.S. degree in Educational Leadership, and a Ph.D. in K-12 Education.



Equitable education systems are fair and inclusive and support their students to reach their learning potential without either formally or informally pre-setting barriers or lowering expectations. ”

- [Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development](#)

The work of equity in education starts with you. Often confused and misunderstood with equality, equity is a way to ensure all students get access to what they need. Equity minded educators understand that education requires high expectations for all students. Additionally, equity ensures the linguistic, cultural, and experiential backgrounds of all students are systematically integrated into curriculum and instruction. Based on students' unique backgrounds, equity minded educators plan and adopt appropriate assessment and instruction.

Although equity can be a very broad term as it may relate to race, gender, ability levels, socioeconomic status, resources, and sexual orientation, the key characteristic here is access. How are we making sure ALL students have access to the resources they need to be successful both academically and socially? Equity is an area that all educators should strive for in their schools and classrooms. As a way for you to get started, here are 10 steps to get you on the right path towards leading equity. Now I don't believe that there is a magic formula to becoming an equity competent educator. My goal is to get you started on the right track with these ten steps to help you with [Teaching Through a Culturally Diverse Lens](#).

# STEP 1

## KNOW YOURSELF AND RECOGNIZE YOUR POSITION OF PRIVILEGE AS AN EDUCATOR

Fostering an equitable learning environment requires you to examine your own assumptions, biases, and positioning. Start by understanding your own cultural identity. Self-reflection helps establish a method of internal investigation as to why you became an educator and the values you have for your students. After a deep reflection on your own perceived identity and assumptions, consider taking the [Implicit Association Test \(IAT\)](#). The IAT measures attitudes and beliefs regarding implicit biases that people may be unwilling or unable to report. Exploring your innermost self in this way may be difficult, but such insight could inform your understanding of how your background and experiences have contributed to your current view of the world. Once you have a more objective view of your own self, you will have a deeper understanding of your impact on others. Always remember that everyone's experiences are different.

### Here are some questions to ask yourself:

1. Who am I as an educator and as a cultural being? \_\_\_\_\_
2. What are my assumptions and what are my beliefs? \_\_\_\_\_
3. How do those beliefs and assumptions impact the way I view people that are different than me, the same as me, and how do they influence the way I interact with students, families, and their communities?  
\_\_\_\_\_





If you want to create a safe and productive environment, use the reflection questions above to consider how effective your current beliefs impact equity in your school. Keep in mind that self-reflection is an ongoing learning process of self-awareness and self-identity. Identify at least one accountability partner to help you with recognizing some areas for you to focus on in your teaching methods. The knowledge that you have about yourself informs what you believe and influences what you do. Furthermore, your behaviors, and what you do in the classroom shape what students believe about themselves and each other.

We all have biases and judgments of others. Some of the biases are racially based on stereotypes and a lack of understanding of particular groups and cultures. It's okay to have biases, as they are a natural part of who we are. The key is to recognize those biases and reflect on how to overcome them to establish a learning environment of high expectations for all students regardless of your perceptions regarding their abilities and backgrounds.

Do not view a student's abilities from a deficit lens or associate students with labels (i.e., stereotypes, socioeconomic status, gender, race). Reliance on labels will strain trust building and stifle the full expression of a student's potential. Instead, view your students background, culture, and abilities as assets to help them thrive in their learning. This same view of openness will, ultimately, broaden and enrich the learning experience of all your students.



# STEP 2

## GET TO KNOW YOUR STUDENTS

Seriously, really get to know your students on a personal level. Flip the questions that you asked yourself in Step 1 above and explore the reality of the student experience:

1. Who are they as a student and cultural being? \_\_\_\_\_
2. What are their assumptions and beliefs? \_\_\_\_\_
3. How do these beliefs and assumptions impact the way they view people who are different or the same as them? And, how does this influence the way they interact with teachers, family members, and their communities?  
\_\_\_\_\_

A key component to getting to know your students is seeking to understand the reality of their experiences as students and community members. After you have considered the above three questions, you can best validate their lived experiences in your classroom.

A simple step in getting to know your students is learning your students' names and taking the time to pronounce those names based on student pronunciation preference, instead of trying to Americanize a name because it is easier and convenient. One of the first steps of marginalization of a student is the failure to acknowledge the correct pronunciation of the student's name. The simple gesture of practicing the preferred pronunciation of a student's name validates to them your level of care. It shows students that they matter to you and will open doors to gaining trust and respect of your students. Bottom line, love your students for who they are and not what you think they should be.

Don't operate on "It's okay for students to be Black and Brown but not be Black and Brown when they are in my classroom." Such a notion comes from the belief that "colorblindness" creates a safe place for all students. However, consider the following: First, understand when you enact "colorblindness" you have likely done so because your implicit biases pertaining to students of color have already been activated. Second, simply because you have adopted a mindset of creating equity for all of your students, don't assume other students have done the same. It's up to you as the teacher to set the tone. Finally, don't expect students to put aside their identities in the classroom and succumb to how society believes students should think and learn in class. Instead, ask your students questions about their language, culture, and interests to gain insight into how your students are experiencing schooling.



# STEP 3

## SPEND TIME WITH STUDENTS OUTSIDE OF SCHOOL SETTINGS

Take the time to learn from your students in an environment that is outside of your supervision. Students become the experts in environments in which they are comfortable to be themselves. This helps you learn their natural behaviors and engagement with the world. Seeing your students outside of class may help you discover their hidden talents, their passions, their preferred language, and the practices they use to solve problems. Consider the knowledge you gain from spending intentional time with students in their world as a blueprint to establish trust and help them engage authentically in the classroom.

For instance, have you ever listened to your students talk about what they did over the weekend or the activities they participated in outside of school? See for yourself! Intentionally visit students while they are in their community. This might include home visits, church visits, competitions, and out-of-school programs.





Most students enjoy learning but learn better in their preferred learning approach. Moreover, tying in a students' background initiates their creativity and exploration. When you prepare course-content based exclusively on your assumptions of what they need, you risk failure of achieving an optimal learning environment. Consider how your expectations of your students to operate in class requires them to change their natural tendencies and preferred ways to engage with content that is relevant to them. While self-expression of the educator is an important component of course content, mindfulness of varied learning preferences can bring new challenges to all students while simultaneously providing opportunities for each student to better express their potential.

At first, you might find yourself uncomfortable being in a space outside of your classroom in which a different language is spoken, perhaps accompanied by unfamiliar cultural practices and customs, and just the general sense of things happening that you don't understand. However, observing their methods of problem solving and how they go about doing things in their cultural world provides valuable information for you to implement in your classroom. Try to understand their perspective and reflect on what your classroom might look like if students weren't locked into the traditional forms of what education should look like. While spending time with your students ask yourself these questions:

1. What activities bring smiles to my students faces when they are in their own environment?

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2. What would my classroom look like if I incorporated the things I learned from interacting with students in their own environment?

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Reading books on equity and inclusion alone is not enough. Books are often written in general terms that provide an overview of being culturally responsible. Instead, remember that all communities are different and even though there are commonalities between ethnic groups, you need to get more specific by learning from the characteristics of your students and their communities.



# STEP 4

## CHECK YOUR CURRENT LANGUAGE PRACTICES

Language shapes our world and how we see things. The words we use and the way we use them are tied to how we view this world. Check your language practices and what you are inviting students to be and how they are expected to speak. Allow students to speak comfortably in their language. Avoid the traditional approach of “this is how you should speak and how English should be spoken.” In other words, be open to different modes of expression and don't let communication differences become a barrier to the exchange of meaningful ideas in the classroom.

Students may feel more comfortable speaking in a mixture of their native tongue and English (such as Spanglish or African American Vernacular). Students need to know that it is safe to engage in dialogue that is comfortable to them to spark more engagement in your classroom. For students of color, being in their comfort zone of how they can speak and the way they can communicate in discussions is important. If your students talk over each other and communicate with vigor on topics that they are interested in, don't stifle or suppress their communication practices by structuring a rigid discussion format. Allow conversations to flow in all their complexities. Allowing students to freely communicate in their familiar manner may be uncomfortable at first because it disrupts the way we have been trained with how a class discussion should be. At first, it might feel like mayhem, however, pay attention to the richness and thought-provoking contributions that students give to class discussions.



Interruptions from students in discussions may lead to an increase of participation and engagement that may not have happened if students were called on or facilitated in a manner that was deemed “appropriate.” Understand that not everyone engages in a calm, hand-raising, turn-taking way of discussion that is generally viewed as acceptable. That's not the only way a meaningful and intellectually rigorous discussion can unfold. Establish an understanding of students respecting each other's opinions while allowing them to express themselves in a manner that comes naturally. Again, it is okay for your room to be loud, as long as the discussions are engaging and meaningful. While loudness can be construed as unruliness, in the context of lively, academic discussion, it may actually be indicative of passion for and engagement with the topic. Appreciate the richness of other types of language and what it means in learning. If you are disallowing those kinds of conversations to unfold because they are uncomfortable for you or if you are disallowing students to switch back and forth from their first language to a traditional English format because you don't fully understand everything, you are perpetuating a form of suppression that many students of color experience in school. As the educator, if a student uses terms from another language, you are in a great position to request a translation of the term during the discussion, even if it requires an interruption. Such an overture constitutes inclusivity for both those who *do* understand the term and those who *don't*; it also shows that the educator is actively engaged and interested in what the students find to be important and relevant in the discussion.

### Ask yourself:

1. How am I valuing and appreciating language practices that are different from mine?  
\_\_\_\_\_
2. If I'm feeling excluded in class dialogues because I don't understand all of the language being used, what can I do to better engage in the conversation?  
\_\_\_\_\_

Asking yourself these self-reflective questions places emphasis on whether your classroom norms marginalize, suppress, or hinder students' abilities to maximize learning and growth. As a means of countering potentially negative outcomes consider exposing yourself to new knowledge that directly ties in to your students' lives, for instance, you can learn their language. This is a shift in which you are learning more about your students, but there's more to it than picking up the ability to follow conversations and know what students are saying when they talk in another language. You'll begin to understand what it's like to learn a second language, thereby giving you an appreciation of the challenges students face to articulate their thoughts that are often in a different language from their natural language.

# STEP 5

## PROMOTE A DECOLONIAL ATMOSPHERE

Reflect on who your students are and how they engage with the world. Allow them to bring those talents and skills to address issues and problems that relate to them. Teach from a social justice perspective by embedding content that resonates with students' experiences and issues that are important to them. Go beyond discussing the historical trauma that people of color have experienced such as slavery, genocide, conquistador exploration, and other areas of oppression. Presenting groups exclusively in the context of historical oppression only perpetuates a dominant/non-dominant dynamic between majorities and minorities; essentially, rubbing salt in a wound. It sends a message to students of color that, in the eyes of society, their identities rest on vulnerability to authority. Instead, bring in aspects that address the daily experiences of students of color. Students also need to see the triumphs and successes of their people and how those people gained power and notoriety.

Avoid the exploitation of cultures and deficit perspectives that maintain colonial patterns of power on their wisdom. Instead, help students learn in culturally congruent ways. Help students learn about science, literature, and history from individuals who look like them as the focal point rather than addressing traditional methods of content that are dominated by whiteness.



## Ask yourself:

1. Are my students' behaviors in line with my views of how students are supposed to behave and interact with one another?  
\_\_\_\_\_
2. Am I operating on a “you got to learn this for the test” mindset or am I bringing in culturally relevant content to engage my students and develop their critical thinking skills?  
\_\_\_\_\_
3. In what ways have I ventured beyond my textbook and is the content in the book indicative of my classroom demographics?  
\_\_\_\_\_
4. What indicator in each of my lesson plans illustrates my attention to culturally relevant teaching?  
\_\_\_\_\_

Equity minded educators actively work to ensure their students can see themselves within the course content. If you truly value diversity and student voice, it can't happen through the occasional culturally based holiday or activity (e.g., Hispanic Heritage Month, Black History Month, Native American Month). Instead, culturally relevant teaching must be a daily practice woven into the fabric of the coursework in which students regularly experience lessons that reflect their language and cultural identity. Go beyond observable and concrete measures such as food, music, dress, posters, and books. These are important and exciting to students, but do not stop there. You can do better, and you can dig deeper.

A significant attribute towards equity is the ability to recognize culture and learn how a student's culture impacts their beliefs and behavior. Consider the unconscious associations of students in their behavior and demeanor. For example, ponder the ways that students interact with each other outside of the classroom such as recess and during lunch (settings such as these allow you to learn from students without the expectations of traditional classroom behavior). What are the norms of their social interactions? What are their communication styles? Consider their behaviors and compare them to what you and the school culture consider acceptable and normal.



# STEP 6

## ADOPT AN ADVOCACY MENTALITY

Often, race and social inequities are present in the classroom, yet race and social inequities are difficult for many educators to talk about. As a result, these issues are rarely addressed with intentionality and students from marginalized backgrounds continue to face oppressive practices that minimize and suppress their identities on a regular basis. Instead, you must actively engage in investigating inequitable practices amongst colleagues and school policies and not stand on the sideline hoping that someone else will say something; students will not thrive if you adopt a passive approach.

### Ask yourself:

1. What teaching practices am I utilizing that challenge traditional forms of teaching?  
\_\_\_\_\_
2. To what extent are my actions displaying to my students that I value their language, culture, and identities? \_\_\_\_\_
3. In what ways have I critically practiced culturally responsive teaching through a socially just lens?  
\_\_\_\_\_

Invest in meaningful dialog that brings awareness to issues students from marginalized backgrounds are facing in school. Such dialog can bring about heightened socio-cultural consciousness. Furthermore, equity focused teachers instruct their students on how to discuss equity and social justice. These are learned concepts and teachers can help their students develop awareness and advocacy skills because students also need to learn how to advocate for themselves and others.

A strong student group that is organized with a mission and objectives goes a long way when it comes to challenging institutional practices that are unjust towards certain groups. On local and national scales, have students engage in lessons that address controversial topics such as mass incarceration, police brutality, civil rights, immigration, racial profiling, healthcare disparities, unequal pay issues, trauma, suicide, drug abuse, women's rights, and privilege. Have students discuss and question the contributing factors to these issues and teach them to think critically on how these issues impact them personally and others.

Finally, students need to experience empowerment and to view themselves as change agents who can make a difference in their community. Teach them how they can get involved and contribute to disrupting damaging behaviors that are considered to be normal and acceptable in their school and community.



# STEP 7

## EDUCATE YOURSELF

Find literature to support your learning and understanding of equity. Challenge yourself to read books written about historically marginalized groups authored by people of color. Find books written beyond the area of education and seek books that portray stories of oppression. Don't settle for books that are meant to make you comfortable, instead read books that will challenge your level of comfort. Approach the literature with an open mind to learn about marginalized people and their experiences; avoid the tendency to exclusively seek validation of your own beliefs. This will help you appreciate the challenges that historically marginalized, specifically people of color, go through and live through. This will also help you gain a better understanding of the assimilation mindset: The traditional set of expectations we place upon students of how they should learn, respond, and behave in the classroom.

### Ask yourself:

1. What books have I read on multicultural education and equity?

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2. How am I actively seeking knowledge to address social justice as a professional?

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We need to learn to disrupt the way we approach learning from a “one size fits all” approach. The way your students see and exist in the world is different; different from you and different from each other. Your students of color have generationally had to deal with issues that continue to suppress their identities, require them to code switch (alternating between two or more languages), and survive in dual worlds. The world that they physically live in and the world their teachers expect their students to live in. What is needed is a mindset shift; we need educators to change how they see and recognize culture in the world. Part of this process requires educating yourself and letting the book take you on a journey that will help you better understand cultural realities and close the distance between you and your students.

# STEP 8

## MODEL VULNERABILITY AND HUMILITY

In doing equity work, the premise should never be “us” vs “them.” Instead, recognize that you are in it together with your students. Do not be afraid to show students what you do not know and allow them to see that you are still developing your capacity for understanding the experiences your students have at home and at school. Being vulnerable is not the easiest thing for educators to do because we operate from an authoritarian and classroom leadership perspective. However, students respect the fact that a teacher is unafraid to display their lack of understanding and willingness to learn from their students.

### Ask yourself:

1. How can I expect students to feel safe enough to share about themselves if I am not willing to do the same? \_\_\_\_\_
2. Who are the people in my life who can serve as accountability partners in my pursuit of an equitable environment? \_\_\_\_\_
3. Where is a safe space, system, or resources that will allow me to engage in conversations on how to better serve students of color?  
\_\_\_\_\_

Another way that humility can work is by participating in the same activities as your students. If you are having students participate in discussions and activities that require them to share personal stories and understanding, model that same vulnerability by opening yourself up to helping students get to know you on a personal level.



# STEP 9

## RECOGNIZE HOW TO BUILD ON STUDENTS' ASSETS

Asset-based pedagogy is the view that students bring assets to the classroom, as opposed to the view that students come to the classroom with deficits or voids, we, as educators, need to fill. Students of color who are recognized by their teachers for their assets are more likely to be referred to accelerated academic opportunities such as to Gifted and Talented and more likely to be successful academically. Fostering student success is about understanding, appreciating, and incorporating students lived experiences. Students need to see examples of themselves in the content that is presented to them in class to illustrate that there is a possibility for them to achieve.

When students' identities, languages, and cultures are suppressed to showcase the dominant culture's way of life, it marginalizes and devalues a student's self-worth. Instead, we need to refrain from pushing our students to reach the level of what society has viewed as acceptable and embrace the uniqueness that students bring to the table and how they can be themselves and still achieve success.





# STEP 10

## USE SOCIAL JUSTICE AS THE BASIS FOR ADVOCACY

The final step towards addressing educational equity is embracing social justice and advocacy. Equity Advocates are not afraid to challenge and disrupt inequities taking place at school and in the community. These are the educators who take on comments made against students based on discrimination and prejudice. These are educators to whom students can turn to for guidance on how to use their own voice for social justice. These are educators who are not bystanders but speak up when inequitable practices take place.

### Ask yourself:

1. If someone asked my students what they liked best about me, would they respond with comments centered around my values of equity and inclusivity?  
\_\_\_\_\_
2. Have I missed opportunities to speak up about injustices? What could I do to prepare to respond if inequities take place?  
\_\_\_\_\_

Teachers who have a stronger knowledge of multicultural education, as well as civil rights, law, and history, have a much deeper understanding about achievement disparities and don't fall into the mindset that blames students for societal, systemic failures. You can be a leader by setting examples for your colleagues; it can be contagious. Examples of warmth and care for students can spread to colleagues who have developed negative views of students and blame them for their lack of success. The more you share with your colleagues, the more opportunities for teachers who are unfamiliar with their own biases to begin their journey of transformation towards an equitable classroom.

# FINAL THOUGHTS

Our students need more equity minded educators in their school and community. We have the power to influence so many lives, but it starts with us. It starts with us not being afraid to learn more about the students we serve and to speak up when we witness racism, sexism, homophobia, and discrimination against our students. We can't avoid these issues and hope that someone will say something. We have the power to speak, we have the power to [teach through a culturally diverse lens](#). We have the power to create a learning environment that embraces the identities, languages, and literacies of our students through culturally responsive and equitable praxis.

## WE WANT TO HELP

Imagine a school in which students are inspired to learn because the curriculum and instruction is relevant to their languages, interests, and cultural practices. A school in which, students of color thrive because their unique qualities are viewed as assets and not deficits. What about a classroom in which students can freely discuss social justice issues that affect them and their communities?

At the [Leading Equity Center](#), we focus on supporting educators with the tools and resources necessary to ensure equity at their school.

Let us help you place the focus back on student learning through a culturally diverse lens!

