

## Ethical Education

Although equal access to education is a cornerstone of democracy, our nation's education system has been rife with injustice throughout its history. It is imperative that we as teachers examine our own system of beliefs to be certain we are teaching for the greater good, rather than to reinforce the inequality of the status quo. Public education is perhaps the truest form of democracy in our nation, in that it provides an opportunity to empower all people, beyond just those born into advantageous positions. It can be hard to remember this truth, however, when a classroom of students seems to refuse to listen or learn. It is nonetheless imperative for teachers to strive toward if they are to be teachers of integrity and social justice.



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*In this initial entry, Sarah Yost outlines several basic understandings of cultural competence in teaching, elaborates on the quotations of famous thinkers and writers in education, and details what teachers can do to be sure they are teaching for democracy and justice.*

## **Conditioned But Not Determined: Culturally Competent Teaching**

### **Diagnostic Quiz**

<b>Likely</b>	<b>Unlikely</b>	<b>Statement</b>
		Schools are more segregated now than they were in the 1970s.
		Statistically, black males perform more poorly on standardized tests than do white students, regardless of economic class.
		Race does not matter.
		The teacher has a tremendous impact on his or her students, emotionally and mentally.
		If a student has behavior problems or is academically below level, it is the parents' fault.
		There is a right way to speak and a wrong way to speak.
		Students should be taught Standard English at school.
		White Americans are privileged in a way that African Americans are not.
		All people are equal.
		All children can learn.

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## Questions for Cultural Competence in Teaching

- How does my cultural competency in the classroom affect the Achievement Gap between my students?
- Do students of different cultures have different levels of autonomy? How can I empower all of my students?
- How does my inherited culture condition me to perceive other cultures? Does culture determine ultimately one's success?
- How can I be more culturally competent? How does my cultural competence affect my teaching?
- How democratic is our society? How democratic is my classroom? How do my actions as a teacher affect democracy?
- What are the rights of citizenship? Are any of my students or their families disenfranchised?
- Does treating my students with equity mean treating them all the same?
- How can I balance the predominate cultural curriculum with curriculum that includes and legitimates other cultures as well?
- Does integrity matter to teaching?
- What effect does SES have on the achievement gap? Are we talking about racial or economic problems? How do they relate?
- How is the status quo represented in my school or classroom? Why should I teach my students to critically question the status quo?

## The Democratically Self-Evident

### Basic Understanding

- All citizens are essentially equal
- All citizens deserve **equitable** access to the benefits of **democracy**
- Public education is essentially **democratic** in that it is a critical point for the **disenfranchised** to access **democracy** and make changes for themselves and their families.

### Related Quotations

- “To know that I must respect the **autonomy**, the dignity, and the identity of the student and, in practice, must try to develop coherent attitudes and virtues in regard to such practice is an essential requirement of my profession, unless I am to become an empty mouther of words.”

-Paulo Freire

- “The teacher’s responsibility is considerable, although we are often not aware of it.... (The teacher) will not pass through the classroom without leaving his or her mark on the students.”

-Paulo Freire

### Elaboration

- Capitalism and **democracy** diverge when those of economic disadvantage are denied democratic rights. It is the duty of the public educator to model **democracy** and justice in order to **empower** students with “**autonomy**,” “**dignity**,” and a respected “**identity**.” These terms are essential to **democracy** and should not be denied to citizens of specific race or class.
- Sometimes we feel as teachers that the students have all the power; this is not actually the case. The teacher has a tremendous power to affect her/his students emotionally and mentally. The teacher also has the power to reinforce the **status quo**, or to teach students to **empower** themselves and to critically question their roles in our social order.
- Therefore everything we do counts. If we roll our eyes at a student, if we ignore/permit one student to bully or make a racist comment, if we laugh at a student’s diction or phonetic spelling, if we do not help a struggling student achieve, we ourselves are destroyers of **democracy** and perpetrators of injustice.

### Action

- Act in every situation with **integrity**, justice, and respect.
- Reflect on your actions to be sure you are treating students equitably and that you are moving toward the ideals of democracy.

## The Realities Challenging the Ideals

### Basic Understanding

- Nationally and locally, there is an **achievement gap** between African American (especially male) and white students.
- Inner-city schools, which are often poor and black, nationally receive far less funding than suburban public schools, which are often wealthier and whiter.
- Rural schools also receive far less funding than suburban schools, in many areas because property taxes are lower.

### Statistics

- NAESP reports persistent gaps in achievement between black and white students, with family **SES** making no significant difference, for the past three decades. ([www.naesp.org](http://www.naesp.org))
- While black students make up about 40% of all public schools, white teachers make up about 80%, and black male teachers make up about 3 percent (ibid)
- Black males are more likely to be put in special education classes than any other group of students. (ibid)

### Elaboration

- The issues surrounding this **achievement gap** are complex, but it is our responsibility as educators to recognize that all students are capable of learning, to remain unbiased and open, and to strive for justice, **equity**, and the success of all our students. It is our responsibility as public educators to close the **achievement gap**, and therefore it is important that we struggle to understand it.
- It is also important to recognize that poverty and race are often closely tied, although not wedded. That said, we cannot write off issues as “a class problem” when many injustices are directly descended from slavery or other historical oppressions. In addition, it is important to resist generalizations because while African Americans as a race cannot be called “racially privileged”, there are many African Americans who are economically successful.
- It is important to also recognize that many white students may be of the privileged race, but not have access to the power assumed by those born into economic advantage.
- Finally, it is imperative that teachers remain unbiased when it comes to cultural differences from his or her students. While it is important to recognize these differences for the sake of respecting them, it is also crucial for teachers not to arrange them hierarchically (e.g., my dress shoes are *better* than your sneakers, my grammar is *better* than the way you speak, etc.)

### Action

- Recognize students’ races and other differences in positive ways
- Challenge all students and give them scaffolding and support to succeed
- Never be afraid of your students; earn respect by stern use of direct commands and zero tolerance for foolishness; take a firm, no-nonsense attitude
- Always be sincere – they can easily tell if you are being “real” or not
- Be conscious of your own biases and self-reflect without shame on where they came from (language, shoes, values, family interaction, etc.) Remember: you too are “conditioned but not determined”!

## The Importance of Giving Dignity to Racial Identity

### Basic Understanding

- In order to treat students fairly, we must see our students both as fully human and as members of a specific race or class, because that is how society will always see them and that is how they see themselves.

### Quotation

- "...I have heard many teachers – well-intentioned teachers – utter, 'I don't see color, I only see children.' What message does this statement send? That there is something wrong with being black or brown, that it should *not* be noticed? I would like to suggest that if one does not see color, then one does not really see children. Children made 'invisible' in this manner become hard-pressed to see themselves worth of notice."

–Lisa Delpit

### Elaboration

- You cannot know a person by making an abstraction of them as "just human"; you must fully acknowledge an individual's identity to give them dignity.

### Action

- Code-switching activities that celebrate "home" languages but stress that there is a political power game played in our country, where a certain kind of English is more valued than others, and that they must learn it to be successful
- Incorporate multi-cultural curriculum, not just **Euro-centric**
- Talk openly about race/racism and class/classism in your classroom
- Hang posters representative of all your students' cultures and histories
- Listen to your students and learn about their cultures without making judgments about them and their families

## Competent School Culture

### Basic Understanding

- It is your responsibility as a contributor to school culture or climate to bridge cultural gaps between you and your colleagues, and the best way to do so is to listen rather than assert.

### Quotation

- “We do not really see through our eyes or hear through our ears, but through our beliefs. To put our beliefs on hold is to cease to exist as ourselves for a moment – and that is not easy. It is painful as well, because it means turning yourself inside out, giving up your own sense of who you are, and being willing to see yourself in the unflattering light of another’s angry gaze. It is not easy, but it is the only way to learn what it might feel like to be someone else and the only way to start the dialogue.”

–Lisa Delpit

### Elaboration

- Race relations are not always nice, happy, warm, fuzzy connections. Often times, trying to relate to colleagues of color as a white educator can be difficult, complicated, messy, or uncomfortable.
- Depending on your race, assumptions may be made about you that you don’t think are fair. You may feel defensive or hurt. Your feelings are legitimate, but you must remember that the ultimate goal is dialogue and growth, not to win the argument and assert that you are right and not racist.

### Action

- For white teachers, the best way to improve relations between yourself and colleagues of color is to LISTEN. Always listen first, without thinking of how you will combat the other person’s argument. Try to understand where a person of vastly different experience is coming from. Then, you may be given the chance to express yourself. But remember the goal is not to win, but to understand and grow.
- You must acknowledge the status quo, the power relations at large in our country, and that a black person talking to a white person is a microcosm of that power structure in some cases. That is not to say that a single black person ought to be spokesperson for the race as a whole, of course, it is simply to say that a long-standing complaint by people of color is that white people refuse to listen to another side of the story. Avoid the saying, “Yeah, but...” and deeply reflect before you critique.
- Remember that how you relate to your colleagues builds the foundation of school culture or school climate. If you are friendly, respectful, and listen carefully to the beliefs of others, you contribute to a positive school environment in which you students can learn. Conversely, if you gossip, segregate, assert that you are right above all else and refuse to listen, you contribute to a negative school culture in which students will be less free to learn and succeed.

## Question and Answer: Ethical Education

Q: Is “equitable” the same as “equal”?

A: Not exactly. The difference between equity and equality can best be explained by simple math lesson: one dollar bill is equal to one dollar bill, but four quarters is *equitable* to that dollar bill, as is ten times, twenty nickels, or any other combination of coins that add up to one dollar. To treat students equitably is to give them the same opportunities in different ways to meet their individual needs, and maximize their individual talents.

Q: What do you mean when you say “race matters”? It doesn’t matter to me, because I see all people as equal in their human race.

A: While the equality of humans is an essential truth, the society in which we live today still measures a person by his or her race in a variety of situations. Not only that, but race also matters to your students and many people of color as essential to their identities. If you refuse to acknowledge a child’s race in any way, you are sending the message to that child that his or her identity is at best negligible and at worst shameful.

## Glossary of Terms: Ethical Education

- **Achievement Gap** – Disparity between black male students and white students in academic, standardized testing, graduation, and post graduation success.
- **Autonomy** – Self-governance, self-empowerment of the individual.
- **Culture** – The customary, inherited beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a racial, religious, or social group.
- **Cultural Competency** – The capacity to function effectively across cultural patterns and learning and appreciating new and different cultural manifestations.
- **Democracy** – A government in which the common people are considered as the primary source of political power; the principals of social equality and respect for all people within a community.
- **Disenfranchise** – To deprive the rights of citizenship.
- **Equity** – Just treatment for all people as expressed in different ways at different times (as contrasted with equality).
- **Euro-Centric** – Curriculum which assumes that European culture and history is the center and gage of all civilization.
- **Integrity** – To do what is morally and ethically right regardless of personal comfort or benefit.
- **Socio-Economic Status (SES)** – The measurement of a person or family's social class based primarily on family income.
- **Status Quo** – The existing social order.

## **Suggested Further Reading List: Ethical Education**

Delpit, Lisa. *Other People's Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom.*

Esquith, Rafe. *There Are No Shortcuts.*

Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of Freedom.* Patrick Clarke, trans.

Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed.*

Kozol, Jonathan. *Savage Inequalities: Children in America's Schools.*

Kunjufu, Jawanza. *Black Students. Middle Class Teachers.*

Paley, Vivian Gussin. *White Teacher.*