

Equity Literacy

More Than Celebrating Diversity

Equity literacy means more than hosting multicultural arts-and-crafts fairs or diversity assemblies. It involves real conversations about issues like racism, economic inequality, sexism, homophobia and ableism.

By Paul C. Gorski

Follow me and I'll show you the problem," John said as he rushed past me into the hallway. We moved quickly down a broad corridor past a diversity-themed student art display.

The Dean of Students at a suburban high school — I'll call it Green Hills High — John was delighted as the student body grew more racially and economically diverse. Once populated almost exclusively by middle-class white students, Green Hills now drew from an expanding low-income Hmong refugee community. Meanwhile, due to gentrification in a nearby urban center that left many poor and working-class families priced out of neighborhoods where some had lived for generations, the percentage of African American students was rising steadily at the school.

In addition to his other dean duties, John led the school's diversity efforts, at the request of the principal. "Some people are slow to adjust," he had told me earlier that day. Then he smiled. "But I think it's fantastic — a better learning experience for everybody." **SAY SOMETHING**

His enthusiasm seemed genuine. His office was a shrine to multiculturalism, with walls covered by colorful diversity posters. One, hanging just behind his desk, read "Unity through Diversity."

John had reached out to me seeking advice about what he described as the stubborn diversity problem at Green Hills, which he couldn't seem to resolve. "I've tried everything," he said, exasperated.

So when he rushed by me, asking me to follow, I complied. We passed the art display and then

turned down another hallway. John ushered me through a set of double doors into the cafeteria.

"Here," he whispered, "is the problem." In front of us sat a small group of Hmong students eating lunch and chatting at a round table. John pointed inconspicuously at them and then gestured toward the left side of the cafeteria, where African American students sat at two tables, talking and eating.

"I don't understand," I said. "What's the problem?"

"Can't you see?" he whispered. "The problem is that the students of color are segregating themselves." **SAY SOMETHING**

I scanned the cafeteria again, then turned to John. "I see one table of Hmong students, two tables of African American students and more than a dozen tables filled almost entirely with white students."

John looked at me, puzzled.

"Is it possible that the white students are segregating themselves?" I asked.

He rescanned the room. "I've never seen it that way," he said.

I appreciated his candor and humility. "Your willingness to acknowledge that," I told him, "is the most important tool in your diversity tool belt."



We spent the rest of our time that day talking about what, in my view, were the most formidable barriers to John effectively leading diversity efforts at Green Hills. He and his colleagues didn't lack commitment, kindness or enthusiasm. Nor were they short on practical strategies or diversity programming ideas.

SAYSOMETHING

The biggest barrier at Green Hills when it came to diversity, as at almost every school with which



I've worked, came down to matters of equity literacy. Do I have the complex understanding of bias and inequity that allows me to make sense of diversity-related dynamics in sophisticated ways?

What I know for sure is that if we can't clearly see dynamics, we can't effectively respond to them. As a result, we risk doing more harm than good. Perhaps we expect students of color, lesbian and gay youth, or transgender students to join our celebrations of diversity while we fail to adequately address the ways they feel marginalized in our schools. Maybe we pour resources into recruiting teachers of color but refuse to allocate sufficient resources to ensuring that we are recruiting them into a working environment free of racial bias.

We heard a lot about that alienation a couple weeks later during a series of focus groups we had organized so that John and other folks at Green Hills could hear from the students. While John and his colleagues celebrated diversity, their Hmong and African American students, on average, felt invisible in the curriculum, were frustrated with teachers who ignored racially tinged teasing and were unsure whom they could trust with their concerns.

John began to realize that enthusiasm was not enough. Without deeper understanding, his intentions were misguided.

SAY SOMETHING

Equity literacy is that deeper understanding. It begins with the willingness to see what we might be conditioned not to see. It begins with the humility to

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This was the view that John, a well-intentioned and diversity-minded dean, was taking. Despite his good intentions, his initial reaction was to blame his most alienated students for a dynamic that existed because they felt alienated. It didn't occur to him that what he saw as self-segregation might actually be a symptom of the racially charged atmosphere of the school.

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consider our and our colleagues' culpability.

Say, for example, we notice a trend of lower-income parents attending family-involvement functions at our school at lower rates than their wealthier peers. How do we interpret what we see? Do we assume those parents must not care about their kids' education? If so, we are misinterpreting. For decades, researchers have found that that all parents, regardless of wealth, care deeply about their kids' education. Do we have the equity literacy, then, to step back and ask some deeper questions?

For example, do we arrange opportunities for family involvement in ways that are accessible to parents who likely work evening hours without paid leave? Do we bear in mind that many low-income families don't have access to transportation and struggle to afford child care? Have we done everything possible to ensure that low-income parents experience our school as welcoming and affirming? When we start considering these sorts of questions, we are practicing a higher form of diversity.

SAY SOMETHING

After the focus groups, John and I talked through some deeper diversity questions. Had the school done enough and the right kinds of professional development to ensure it was an affirming, equitable place for every student? Had he considered the more subtle ways in which the Hmong and African American students were being alienated at the school? To what extent had teachers been prepared to develop inclusive curricula and to talk openly about the bias various groups of students were experiencing?

As I explained to John, schools that make the greatest progress related to diversity embrace an approach that is grounded in equity literacy — in strengthening every community member's understanding of equity and inequity. Celebrating diversity is not enough. Cultural competence is a troublingly low bar. We must strive for more.

To grow beyond these approaches and embrace equity literacy, we begin not with a binder full of practical strategies but with a deeper commitment to strengthening our understanding. We allow a deeper understanding of diversity to guide our practice.

Below I share five questions similar to the sorts of questions I asked John. I often use these and similar questions as measuring sticks to help teachers and administrators reflect on their diversity efforts.

I invite you to consider your own diversity efforts through these questions. Each is followed by a nudge toward equity literacy.

Five Questions for Equity Literacy

1

What are the objectives of my diversity efforts? The goal of these efforts should be creating more equity, which requires me to directly address inequity and bias. If I can't explain how they are correlated with greater equity, I need to reevaluate my efforts.

2

Who or what are my diversity efforts intended to "fix"? Are they designed, like efforts to convince low-income families to care more about their kids' education, to fix the most marginalized people in my community or to fix the conditions that marginalize people in my community? If it's the former, my efforts are probably doing more harm than good and should be reconsidered.

3

Am I putting more resources into diversity programming — multicultural arts-and-crafts fairs or diversity assemblies — than into real conversations about issues like racism, economic inequality, sexism, homophobia and ableism? Diversity programming generates positive experiences only if I have the will and the skill to invest in real conversations about important issues.

4

Is my school's diversity professional development built around simplistic diversity approaches, like cultural competence, or around building the community's equity literacy? Good diversity PD should involve cultivating the four skills of equity literacy: recognizing inequity and bias, responding to inequity and bias, redressing inequity and bias, and cultivating equity.

5

Is diversity woven into my curriculum in sophisticated ways or in tokenistic ways? A diversity-infused curriculum should cultivate equity literacy in students so that they can apply their knowledge about diversity to issues affecting their communities. ■

SAY SOMETHING

