

Culture

The role of **Culture** in segregated, desegregated, and integrated schools

Introduction and Background:

A welcoming, inclusive school culture is a critical component of an integrated, equitable school. Culture is a key vehicle for supporting integrated schools as students are more likely to succeed academically when they feel valued and a sense of belonging within the school setting ([B of the ABCDs](#)). In spite of this, many schools inadvertently create a culture that implicitly rewards white, middle class norms, while marginalizing other backgrounds. Culturally inclusive practices, such as staff-wide equity training, values-based behavior management, and advisories, can create a culture of belonging for students of all racial backgrounds, which in turn can lead to higher academic gains and lower disciplinary challenges throughout the school.

Historical and Theoretical Overview:

Although sociologists have studied school culture since the 1930s, it wasn't until the 1970s that educational researchers began to seriously study the connections between school climate (or culture) and student learning. In 1979, Ron Edmonds published one of the first influential studies on effective schools, citing a "safe, orderly climate" as one of the factors associated with student learning. Schools should be "orderly without being rigid, quiet without being oppressive, and generally conducive to the instructional business at hand" (p. 32). In the decades since, studies of school culture have largely expanded the benchmarks of effective school culture beyond "safe and orderly," although one shared definition of what makes culture effective remains elusive.

A safe and orderly learning environment may be necessary for learning, but it is not sufficient. Rather, a strong set of norms and shared values around the capabilities of all students is an essential piece of effective culture. By focusing school behaviors on what is most valued, a strong school culture ensures all actors are aligned in their purpose and actions. In fact, organizational theorists and educational theorists alike agree that school culture is one of the most important ways in which school leaders impact student learning (Fink and Resnick, 2001; Hallinger and Heck, 1998). Several studies show that substantial change is brought about in schools not by technical fixes, but by holistic cultural change (Fullan, 2001; Kytte and Bogotch, 2000; Reavis, *et al*, 1999; Taylor and Williams, 2001; Wang, *et al*, 1997). When the school has a clear understanding of its purpose, and this purpose is aligned to the culture of the school, the culture will work to create an effective learning environment (MacNeil, *et al*, 2009); however, when the beliefs and values of a school are incongruent with student achievement, culture will impede student learning.

Research has highlighted the importance of the principal and school leadership in creating a strong school culture (MacNeil, 2009). Successful school leaders take a "wide-angle" view of school culture (MacNeil, 2009), carefully considering how all aspects of the school align with the broader vision and mission. When implementing reforms, school leaders must ensure that the school culture embraces and

supports the proposed changes, otherwise, teachers and other school staff are unlikely to be motivated to take up changes in a coherent, positive manner.

Approaches and Strategies:

- For school leaders: Courageous Conversations
 - Creating a school and classroom culture that welcomes and values students of all races first requires the acknowledgement that race and class matter. [Courageous Conversations](#) provides resources and a useful framework for building a school team’s capacity for engaging in difficult conversations about race and racism.
- For teachers: Anti-Bias Practices for Classroom Culture
 - [Teaching Tolerance](#) offers 5 practices for creating a safe and welcoming classroom culture: 1) honoring all students’ experiences; 2) thoughtful classroom setup and structure; 3) shared inquiry and dialogue; 4) ensure social and emotional safety; and 5) values-based behavior management. Each of these practices can help teachers ensure that all students are seen and valued in the classroom.
- School-wide: Essentials of a Diversity-Responsive School
 - [This report](#) prepared for Teaching Tolerance provides 9 evidence-based best practices for creating Diversity Responsive Schools. These practices include key indicators of school-wide practices that create and support diversity, including: staff-wide equity-based professional development; recruitment and retention of a racially diverse staff; school-wide practices that are inclusive of all parents and families; and clear procedures for identifying and addressing issues of discrimination.
- School-wide: Restorative Practices
 - Traditional, demerit-based disciplinary systems have been found to disproportionately impact Black and Latino students. However, across the country school districts are implementing an alternative program - Restorative Practices. Rather than focusing on punishment, Restorative Practices focuses on acknowledging and repairing harm. Several large districts have begun implementing Restorative Practices district-wide and have seen discipline disparities and overall suspensions decrease. San Francisco Unified has prepared [this](#) comprehensive guide for school-wide implementation of Restorative Practices.

Systemic Focus:

Stakeholder Groups in RIDES Systemic Map	Strategies with a lens for diversity, equity and inclusion	A* B* C* D *A-academics *B-belongingness *C-commitment to dismantling racism *D-diversity
Teachers	Teaching Tolerance	A; B; C; D

Students	Courageous Conversations	B; C; D
Family and Community Partnerships	Reaching Out to Diverse Populations: What Can Schools Do to Foster Family-School Connections	A; B; C; D
Leadership	Courageous Conversations	C; D
Curriculum	Teaching Tolerance	A; B; C; D
Systems & Structures	Restructuring and Reculturing Schools to Provide Students with Multiple Pathways to College and Career	A; C

Implications:

Practical suggestions for stakeholders

Building a positive school and classroom culture that supports and includes students of all racial backgrounds starts with internal equity-work on the part of adults. For school leaders, the National Equity Project has a number of resources on building equity capacity for you and your team. For teachers, Teaching Tolerance has a number of concrete resources for developing your capacity to engage in transformational racial equity work in the classroom. Finally, it is important that this work be done as a community at your school site, so that participating stakeholders, including students and families, can learn from one another and build on each other’s ideas.

Implications for sites

Culture impacts every part of a student’s school experience, and is therefore one of the most valuable assets a school has in achieving the ABCDs. While building culture takes time and dedication, it is a worthy endeavor that can lead to positive results for racially diverse student bodies. However, it is important to note that building positive culture is difficult with a light-touch approach. Rather, a systemic, sustained, and coherent process is necessary for racially diverse students to feel welcomed at the school at large. For example, all teachers and staff should be trained on equity work so that they can support each other with conveying an inclusive message to students from historically marginalized backgrounds. Discipline, class assignment, and curriculum policies should also be interrogated for possible bias in implementation. A systemic, race-conscious approach to building school culture will help school practices and ideology align with the ABCDs, and over time will result in a truly integrated school.

Conclusion:

Culture is a key vehicle for supporting integrated schools as students are more likely to succeed academically when they feel valued and a sense of belonging within the school setting. Culture should be maintained as a valuable asset. There are tools for teachers and leaders to develop healthy culture using a systemic focus.

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