

The Power of Culturally Responsive Literacy Instruction

Best Practices and Insight from National Thought Leaders:
Dr. Pedro Noguera, Dr. Gholdy Muhammad, and Dwayne Reed





Introduction

From racial injustice to culturally responsive curriculum, the education experts in this guide tackle some of the toughest issues facing today's educators. In this report, we bring together best practices from three respected educators around:

- *How to build better relationships with your students*
- *Why cultivating literacy skills isn't enough*
- *How to break down the barriers to equity*

With embedded video presentations by Dr. Pedro Noguera, Dr. Gholnecsar (Gholdy) Muhammad, and Dwayne Reed, you'll get practical tips to help you navigate these challenging issues and ensure you're addressing the needs of all students while accelerating literacy growth.

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Literacy for All: Understanding and Responding to Racial Injustice in Education

HIGHLIGHTS FROM DR. PEDRO NOGUERA'S PRESENTATION



Critically acclaimed scholar, dynamic speaker and committed literacy activist. Dr. Noguera's work focuses on a broad range of issues related to education, social justice and public policy. He is the author of several best-selling books and is a highly sought-after public speaker and international consultant. Noguera is Dean of the Rossier School of Education at the University of Southern California, Distinguished Professor of Education at the Graduate School of Education and Information Studies and Faculty Director for the Center for the Transformation of Schools at UCLA.

When we think about literacy, it's important that we not simply think about the ability to read and write. Literacy is much broader than that. Take media literacy, for example. Think about how many Americans right now are being manipulated through social media, because they can't even ask questions about the source of the information, and can't distinguish between fake news designed to manipulate and real news based on facts and evidence.

And racial literacy. Think about how many Americans really don't understand the concept of race. They don't recognize that race has been used as a political category to divide people, stigmatize and reinforce privilege for some and denigrate others.

Against this backdrop, how do we prepare our children to both live with and deal with the realities of race and racism in America? How do we equip students with the tools they'll need to see beyond it so that we can create a more just society—one where all members, all people, regardless of how they look or their backgrounds, have the ability to flourish and contribute to society? It all starts with equity.

Equity: Meeting the Needs of All

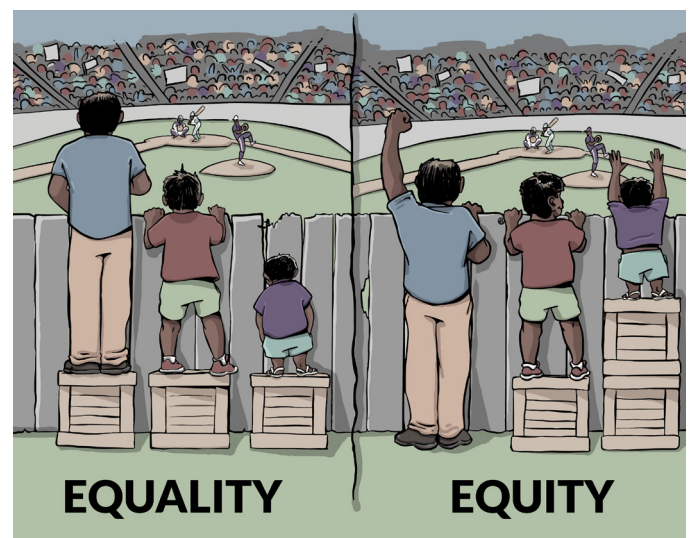
We know that equity is about giving kids what they need to be successful. It's about acknowledging that the academic needs of a child are related to their social, physical and emotional needs. That is, we can't simply focus achievement based on test scores. We've got to acknowledge that there are other factors in a child's

life—like whether or not they have housing, whether or not they have enough to eat, whether or not they have access to the internet to participate in learning. That's all part of equity.

Equity is also about acknowledging that when we try to address the needs of all kids, we're going against the stream, because our society is so profoundly unequal. That's one of the reasons why the most consistent pattern in this country has been: Those with the greatest needs tend to do the least well in our schools.



This clip covers how backgrounds shouldn't determine our children's educational outcomes



We also spend the least on those with the greatest needs, because we don't simply have an achievement gap in this country, we have a gap in how we fund education. It tends to be those who have the most get the most, and those with the least get the least. The strongest predictor for how well our kids will do in school is how much money the family has and how much education the parents have, particularly the mother. If we're going to break the cycle of poverty, if we're going to use education to expand opportunity for all people, then real equity work is about how to eliminate barriers.

It's not about lowering standards. It's about making high standards accessible to all students. And so, how do we tailor instruction to meet the different needs of different children?

There are schools all around the country that are proving you can, in fact, design the conditions that make it possible to educate all kinds of kids. The problem isn't kids. It's our inability to create the conditions that allow us to meet their needs.

Barriers to Equity

One of the most common barriers to equity is complacency. We're engaged in a game of blame, and we're not taking responsibility. We blame the students, parents, administrators, teachers, school boards and superintendents. We shift responsibility to the state governors, Washington, and even global warming, junk food and video games. We're not focused on the things we do control, because we are preoccupied with the things we don't control.

Poverty is certainly an obstacle. There are lots of kids, especially right now during this pandemic, who have basic needs that are not being met. But here's the good news: We don't have to wait until we eliminate poverty to educate kids because poverty is not a learning disability. We do have to address the needs.

You've got to also know how to relate to those children, because kids learn through relationships. And one of the things that gets in the way of relating to the children is bias—racial bias, cultural bias and linguistic bias. But kids will learn from any teacher they know cares about them, regardless of their race. Kids can also tell

if you don't like them, are afraid of them or don't believe in them. So as an educator you need reflect on whether or not you can focus on the outcomes. Are you willing to treat the children you serve the way you would want your children to be treated? Ultimately, that's the question we've got to answer, because that's where equity really enables us to meet the needs of all students.

Addressing Student Needs Together

Think about Brockton High School, the largest high school in the state of Massachusetts. At one point it was considered the worst school in the state, and it was projected that 75 percent of the students would fail the high-stakes state exams. Which meant they wouldn't graduate.

The teachers were worried and told the principal that the only way the kids would pass the exam was if every teacher became a teacher of literacy. Because literacy is what was keeping their kids back. So the teachers taught each other to become literacy instructors, and by 2002, when the first exams were given, 50 percent of the kids were passing. By 2006, it was 80 percent. And, by 2010, 90 percent of the kids at Brockton High were passing the state exam. One-third of the senior class was getting the highest possible score.

The Boston Globe, which once called Brockton a cesspool, started to talk about it as a model for what's possible in urban education. It's important to know that they didn't change Brockton. It's still a depressed community. They still fight. They have a drug problem. But they also have a great high school. What they didn't do was sit around and blame the middle school or blame the parents. They said, "Let's make the children what they are. Let's address their needs together."

Time for a New Approach

Sometimes, we have to try things differently. We have to learn about our students and their interests, so we know how to make education meaningful. Our kids are capable of learning all kinds of things. If we can make connections between who they are and what we need to teach them, that's when education becomes powerful.

This clip tells the story of a teacher who sparked curiosity in her students with a hermit crab



We also have to give kids numerous opportunities to revise and resubmit their work. The real learning occurs when there's evidence of growth, evidence that kids are really working at their potential and pushing themselves to excel. So don't be afraid to get feedback and questions from your kids. Get together with your colleagues on a regular basis to analyze student work, to talk about that work together and ask, "What are you doing in your classroom? And why is it that your kids are writing those great essays, and my kids are struggling?"

The biggest obstacle to improving teaching right now is the isolation of our teachers. I encourage you to create schools where it's okay for you to work together. We improve together as colleagues when we collaborate, when we share.



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Cultivating Genius: An Equity Model for Culturally and Historically Responsive Literacy

HIGHLIGHTS FROM DR. GHOLDY MUHAMMAD'S PRESENTATION



*Best-selling author of **Cultivating Genius: An Equity Model for Culturally and Historically Responsive Literacy** and transformative leader in culturally responsive education, Dr. Muhammad works with teachers and young people across the United States and South Africa to instill best practices for culturally responsive instruction. Dr. Muhammad is currently an associate professor of Language and Literacy at Georgia State University. Additionally, she serves as the director of the Urban Literacy Collaborative and Clinic.*

When you study the reading sciences and how curriculum has been traditionally taught in school, it has all been connected to skill development. But teaching culturally and historically responsive literacy means going deeper than simply cultivating skills. Literacy has to be connected to action. What's the point of students learning new things in your classroom if they don't go and create social change and action in communities?

In my work, I talk about a new way forward. One that is founded in genius. Here I'll be sharing some best practices from my book, *Cultivating Genius: An Equity Framework for Culturally and Historically Responsive Literacy*. This is just a quick introduction to the model I created. The book draws from Black history and Black historical excellence in order to reframe, readjust and reimagine what we need to do in schools today for all children.

Founding Instruction on Genius

We currently have 20 percent proficiency in literacy for Black children across the nation in fourth grade. This is because we have never grounded the instruction in genius, in their histories, in their liberation. It's like designing a dress and never asking for their measurements and then expecting them to fit a dress that was never designed for their bodies.

If you think about the genius during the 19th century of the Black people in literacy—using sounds to communicate liberation—that's genius. Who would have thought that at a time when you were stolen from your land, and your literacies, language and identity were stripped away from you, that you would be

developing communicative devices to signify freedom? That's genius. Braiding hair maps for mathematics and for directions in young girls' hair to signify, "Go this way for freedom." That is genius.



This clip covers how today's literacy instruction is absent of Black histories, identities, etc.

We've come away from this kind of genius in our schools, although Black people have always been talking about the genius in our race. It was other people who said we weren't genius and called us non-readers. Yet the literary genius and the literacy of Blackness can be seen throughout history. Maria Stewart, a most beloved Black essayist, used rhetoric in powerful ways. Zora Neale Hurston showed us that the way you talk—your Black language—is good enough, even when many others said it wasn't. Jamila Lyiscott taught us that you can speak multiple languages and multiple types of English.

We have jazz. We have bounce music. We have hip-hop. We have literacy and genius, but our schools never value our types of literacy. And then we wonder why our students don't respond in the classroom.

5 Central Goals for Learning

In studying the work of the Black literacy societies, I found that they had five central goals for learning. In today's schools, we have one—cultivating skills—but they had five, which is more intellectually rigorous and invigorating. And they didn't call their learning objectives standards, but pursuits. While a standard is trapped in smallness and indicates a ceiling, a pursuit means, "I am learning this for my life, for self-determination, self-reliance, self-empowerment." Today, every child should have those things.

These are the pursuits:

Pursuit #1: Identity

You're helping your students discover who they are, who others say they are, and who they desire to be. Ask yourself: How does my instruction help students to learn something about themselves or others who may not look like them, think like them or be like them?

Pursuit #2: Skill

These are the proficiencies we currently teach in literacy. Decoding, vocabulary, citing textual evidence, but it's not what we want students to become smarter about. We want students to become smarter about the intellect through the use of those skills.

Pursuit #3: Intellectualism

Rather than just becoming smarter about fluency and phonics, students should be learning new histories, new people, new places, new things. If I say, "What did your students learn today?" you shouldn't say, "Citing textual evidence." Instead, say, "Citing textual evidence about a story about frogs." Or whatever you're teaching.

Pursuit #4: Criticality

This is helping students to become woke. It's helping students to understand power, privilege, humanity, inequities, oppression, anti-sexism and anti-racism. It involves so much, but you should start with anti-racism because anti-racism is a type of oppression that will help you understand other oppression. If you want to understand sexism better, you have

to start with racism.

Why do we need criticality and literacy learning? The simple answer is because we have oppression, hurt and wrongdoing in the world, and we want to cultivate the child who does not contribute to other people's hurt and harm. We want to cultivate the kind of child who isn't silent on other people's harm, who doesn't make jokes that are hurtful.

Pursuit #5: Joy

I have to share this with you because it's beautiful and we all deserve some beauty. This was written in 1837 by an anonymous Black author.

"By reading, you can visit countries. You can converse with the wise. You can view elegance while reading. You can view elegance and architecture through a book. You can view sculpture and painting. You can ascend. By reading, you can enkindle the most sublime emotions that can animate your human soul."

Now, this is a beautiful thing, and this is the new goal for your literacy instruction. How does my literacy instruction animate the human soul?

To teach all of these goals, think about layering powerful pieces of texts on the anchor text so students can be invited in to participate. You have the textbook, but think about what short, powerful multimodal text you can add or layer. It can be video, an image or a song. The idea is to go beyond just cultivating skills to teaching culturally responsive material. Here are a couple of lesson plans that cover these learning pursuits:



This clip shows two lesson plans and how these five goals are addressed in them.

Reevaluating Your Curriculum

We have racial injustice, problems with education, virtual learning, and a pandemic. We have so much going on right now, it's time our curriculum writing can be responsive to the times we're living in. When's the last time your school did a curriculum evaluation? Is it culturally responsive or culturally destructive in the words of the NYU Culturally Responsive Curriculum Scorecard?

Don't just stay comfortable with the teaching of worksheets and skills and textbooks. When the curriculum isn't good enough, what do you do? When the standards aren't responsive to Black children, what do you do? Do you keep them? Is it ethical? You know how doctors take the oath of doing no harm. If you keep them, that's a source of harm. If you do more with them, that's better.

You have to study the history of your discipline across different cultural contexts. You have to know yourself and your bias. You have to cultivate your own genius. In other words, cultivate your mind and your heart, and then move to your pedagogy.



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Teaching culturally and historically responsive literacy means going deeper than simply cultivating skills. Literacy has to be connected to action.

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How to Become the Educator Your Students Need

HIGHLIGHTS FROM DWAYNE REED'S PRESENTATION



America's Favorite Rapping Teacher, Dwayne Reed, has been crisscrossing the globe, promoting his message of love and equity in education. After seeing viral success with the release of his educational music video, "Welcome to the 4th Grade," Reed has been on a mission to convince the world that relationships mean everything in education.

Who is the educator you needed most when you were a kid? Who was that person who kept you going, supported you, made you feel loved? For me, it was Ms. Johnson, my super-cool high school math teacher. One day, she caught me writing raps in geometry class. She picked up my notebook, read through my lines, smiled for half a second, then went about her business.

That was one of the most encouraging and influential boosts of my life. Instead of crushing my dreams as a child, she affirmed them. And now, as an adult, I travel across the country, making academic songs to help kids with things like geometry.

Being a great educator like Ms. Johnson means understanding that relationships matter. It's the idea that we must Maslow before students can Bloom, or put our kids' basic needs first before anything else worthwhile can take place. In other words, a relationship with your kids is the most essential aspect of your educational career.

Creating those relationships starts with knowing the answers to these three questions:

- **Who am I?**
- **Who are my students?**
- **Who are we together?**

Who Am I to My Students?

Every successful relationship starts with one person revealing themselves to the other. It's why I created the "Welcome to the 4th Grade" video so that my kids would know the craziness that they were going to get with me from the very beginning.



Dwayne Reed's Viral Video "Welcome to the Fourth Grade" Introduction

As an educator, one of the easiest things that you can do to foster a positive relationship with your scholars is talk about yourself. I tell my scholars as much as I possibly can about myself so that they can find something to latch onto. For example, my boys like that I play basketball, and that I'm generally into sports. My girls like that I know about different hairstyles, the types of hair that they have, and I keep up with some of the famous singers and entertainers that they're super into and that I'm super into.

Being the educator your scholars need means answering the question of "Who am I?" to your kids, so they can get to know you and like who you are as a person. If you tell them nothing, they'll like nothing. But if you tell them everything, I promise, they'll find something that they like. And, more than that, they'll be more willing to listen to you, because they like something about you.

Who Are My Students?

The “Relationships Matter” principle says that if you get to know your students, they’ll want to know what you’re trying to teach them. While your students are learning math and reading, you should be learning about them and the best ways to teach and love them. Ask them questions about their interests, what excites or frustrates them, who they live with, what they want to be when they grow up.

This clip discusses the importance of knowing how students believe their teachers see them



That’s what great educators do. They know that compiling data about their kids is worthless if they don’t use it to their benefit. One way to do this is to make frequent references to the things you know about them during instruction. For example, like everybody’s kids, my kids love to play Fortnite. So during class I make references to the new skins, packs, missions, and I even do the little dances they do during instruction, because it gives me an five extra seconds of their attention. And it’s a connective piece of our day.

You’ll also need to learn about what kinds of things your students are dealing with at home. This could be abandonment, molestation, physical and verbal abuse, drug addiction, foster care woes, gun violence, gang affiliations within the school and food insecurity. So, if a student hasn’t eaten anything in the last two days, they really don’t really care about this reading activity. They need to be fed. It’s Maslow before Bloom.

Being aware of some of the mess that takes place in our kids’ lives will help us love them through some of the mess that they bring into our classrooms. If you believe that relationships matter, then that means knowing your scholars well enough to know exactly how they need to be loved and knowing that you always need to institute and employ grace.

Talk About Race and Racism

You can’t understand who your students are without talking about race or racism. But schools in America and the teachers in them have not done the best job of speaking with young people about these issues. Some teachers might think they’re protecting students by not talking about race, or that students are too young to handle it. But that’s simply not true. Young people can make sense of the world around them and how they fit into it. And, for many of them, they must make sense of these things. It’s a matter of survival.



This clip discusses why we should talk to young people about race

These conversations that we have will give kids the tools they need to work through their thoughts, feelings, fears, misconceptions and concerns about the racialized world they live in. Not talking about race is not an option. In fact, not talking about race in school is like not teaching history. You’re setting your students back.

Another reason why teachers should talk about race with their scholars is because race is a huge part of your kids’ identity. It shapes how people are viewed and treated. Black, Brown, whatever they are, your kids of color deserve to be seen, to know that their teacher values them and sees all that they bring to the table in a positive light. When having these conversations with young people about race, ask questions, equip them with age-appropriate language, challenge them to think critically, address and correct fear and misconceptions. And finally, just listen. Let them talk.

Who Are We All Together?

The difference between a good teacher and a great teacher is intentionality. You don’t just end up with a positive classroom or school environment by accident. It’s always due to the connections and relationships that educators work hard to create.

Knowing who you are together means creating a “Culture of We.” One of the easiest ways to do this is to greet your students at the door. There’s nothing better than a warm, smiling face greeting you early in the morning. Meet them at the door and set the positive tone for your entire day.

Another way to cultivate this Culture of We is to play. Incorporate fun into the school day. Kids like to have fun. Let’s not create these miniature adults. Let’s let them be kids. Also, don’t take things personally. Over the course of the year, many of your kids want to lash out, call you names and blatantly disrespect you. The reality is, it’s probably not about you.

Finally, think about how this Culture of We can exist outside the classroom. Go to your students’ sports games, recitals and shows so they can look into the crowd and see you, their teacher, smiling at them from afar, clapping and cheering. When they see you were there for them, they’ll be motivated to do that work for you in the classroom.

To become the educator your students need, you’ll need to remember that the most important thing in education is not academic. It’s that relationships matter.

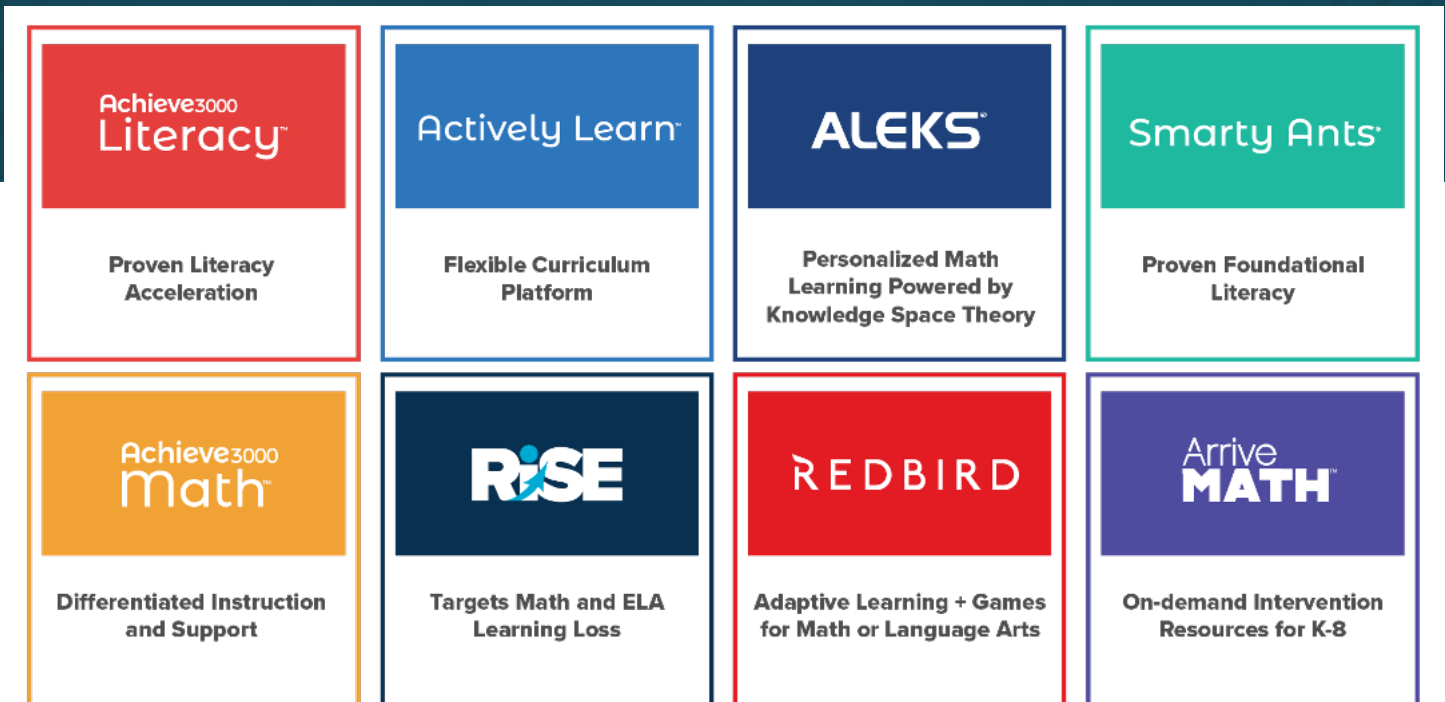


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McGraw Hill's digital acceleration solutions demonstrate a strong commitment to social justice with an equitable curriculum and culturally relevant content.



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Published by McGraw Hill.

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