

ESL Best Practices Quick Reference Guide: Racial Equity and Social Justice

Overview

Ensuring racial equity is an enduring challenge nationally and in Massachusetts. English learners represent communities of color and nondominant cultures and languages and have often not been provided equitable access to rich learning opportunities. They also face [systemic and institutionalized oppression](#) in the form of bias, prejudice, discrimination, and overt racism. Educators of English learners play a special role in promoting equity. This is especially true of ESL teachers, because learning a language also means negotiating new identities that bridging previous experiences with a new language and the way it is used across various settings and for different purposes. ESL teachers can help support English learners' positive cultural, socio-emotional, and [academic](#) identity development amidst challenges. Adopting a [social justice](#) orientation (such as highlighted in the Next Generation ESL Theory of Action) can help educators collaborate with parents, students and community members to promote more equitable experiences and learning outcomes for English learners.

Equity means...

...every student has meaningful access to the educational resources and rigor they need at the right moment to achieve their full potential - regardless of their background or personal characteristics.

...traditionally marginalized students receive high-quality learning opportunities that position them as active learners, doers, and meaningful members of their community.

Adapted from [Aspen Education & Society Program](#) and [Council of Chief State School Officers](#), 2017

| Challenges | Opportunities |
|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Deficit-thinking, racism, and bias in individual educator practice as well as school and district systems – these can show up as lower academic expectations, watered-down curriculum, lack of scaffolds and supports, and harsher discipline for English learners Lack of understanding about culturally relevant, responsive and/or sustaining pedagogy and how to implement it effectively English learners may possess different perspectives on social justice, racism, equity, and civic action based on their diverse backgrounds and experiences | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased attention and interest in promoting equity for English learners by adopting a social justice orientation and addressing racial inequities Professional learning focused on social justice and racial equity can support positive changes in practices, structures, and systems Remote learning supported development of new, more effective ways to teach English learners, collaborate with other educators to support them, and communicate with and their families that can be continued |

Strategies and Best Practices

Promoting racial equity and social justice requires evaluating systems, structures, processes, and practices, through an [equity lens](#) to ensure learning environments support all students to be successful. As part of this kind of holistic approach, educators across classroom, school, and district levels can support English learners' academic achievement, cultural competence, and critical consciousness by:

Attributes of Educators with a Social Justice Stance

- Remain a learner and partner with students (rather than a position as all-knowing authority transmitting knowledge to students)
- Seek to find the assets and strengths of others
- Acknowledge the power of teaching to uphold or disrupt racism
- Are committed to planning, acting, reflecting, and becoming more anti-racist in practice.

Adapted from [Keffrelyn D. Brown](#), 2020

- Embracing values, beliefs and dispositions that support social justice and anti-racism.** Educators can begin by examining ways in which consciously or unconsciously held personal views of self and others' racial backgrounds impact their view of Black/African American, Latino, Asian, and White students, and how this plays out in their own [teaching](#) and leadership. From there, they can learn about and start developing a critical lens, a sense of responsibility, and capabilities for incorporating [sociocultural pedagogical practices](#).
- Investigating their local context and community for evidence of inequities, discrimination, and racism as well as opportunities to promote social justice.** Learn about students' racial, ethnic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds and the communities they belong to expand single story views of people from different backgrounds.

- **Learning about, valuing, and using students’ cultural and linguistic practices.** Build on students’ current [funds of knowledge](#) and [cultural capital/wealth](#) to expand and sustain them¹, not replace them. Highlight to students the value of their ability to navigate multiple communities across race, ethnicity, language, and culture in an increasingly diverse society.²Incorporate students’ language and cultural practices into instruction to promote conceptual understanding, language competence, and mastery of analytical practices. Help students build on what they know to learn new things, and how to use all they know to develop a positive identity, language and academic proficiency, and future success.
- **Actively maintaining a learning environment built on trust and caring relationships as essential elements** needed to support ELs’ positive social, cultural, and academic identity development, sense of belonging, language growth, academic achievement, and critical consciousness. Establish classroom norms that value and affirm all voices in the classroom. Explicitly teach [social and emotional learning](#) competencies to support students engage with racial equity and social justice topics.
- **Designing instruction and curriculum that promotes social justice and racial equity.** Ensure instruction is rigorous and curriculum promotes critical thinking and deep learning. Incorporate social justice topics, exploring current stereotypes and deficit-based ideas. Develop and/or adopt curriculum and instructional materials that reflect diverse voices and people from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds, and that actively engage students in making meaning and recognizing inequities. Model how to become, and help students develop into, “social actors who have a sense of their own agency as well as a sense of responsibility towards others and the society as a whole”.³
- **Employing a variety of [asset-based](#) and culturally responsive teaching practices** to support academic rigor and help students learn about and change their social and political contexts. This requires negotiating power with students, helping them develop a view of themselves as actors capable of influencing their personal lives and social systems, and supporting their agency with new classroom roles (teachers as students, students as teachers⁴).
- **Providing opportunities for students to explore their multiple, fluid, and complex identities** as language learners from diverse racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds. For example, explicitly teach how to use language for specific purposes - including language to express one’s voice and identity - based on sociocultural factors (social roles, audience, task, topic, etc.). Affirm the ways students already manage interactions in multiple, different cultures and settings. Highlight when to use specific language practices (both known and new) to navigate and transition across different areas of life (school, home, community, etc.).
- **Partnering with other educators, English learners and their families, and the local community** to act in ways that promote racial equity and social justice within your sphere of influence. [Provide opportunities](#) for these key stakeholders to give input about what works and what does not, barriers encountered, and ways to improve the system to address oppression. Incorporate their feedback when making decisions, establishing goals, selecting strategies and actions, and evaluating progress towards goals.

Sample Practices and Strategies to Support Social Justice Teaching

- Structured [quality interactions](#)
- [Constructivist](#) approach
- [Intergroup dialogues](#) with reflection cycles
- [Cooperative learning](#)
- [Discussion and debate](#)
- Role plays, simulations, [civic projects](#)
- [Abolitionist teaching](#)
- [Historically responsive literacy](#)
- [Youth-led Participatory Action Research \(YPAR\)](#)

¹ Gloria Ladson-Billings. (1995). [Toward a Theory of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy](#). *American Educational Research Journal*, 32(3); Paris, D. & Alim, S. (eds). (2017). *Culturally Sustaining Pedagogies: Teaching and Learning for Justice in a Changing World*. New York: Teachers College Press.

² Paris, D., & Alim, H. S. (2014). What are we seeking to sustain through culturally sustaining pedagogy? A loving critique forward. *Harvard Educational Review*, 84(1), 85–100.

³ Teamant, A. (2015). [Living Critical Sociocultural Theory in Classroom Practice](#). *MinneTESOL Journal*, p. 4.

⁴ Lee, C. (2008). The Centrality of Culture to the Scientific Study of Learning and Development: How an Ecological Framework in Education Research Facilitates Civic Responsibility. 2008 Wallace Foundation Distinguished Lecture. *Educational Researcher*, 37(5), p. 267-279.

Special Considerations: Supporting ELs' Social and Emotional Learning

Newly Arrived Immigrant Students

ISSUE: Students' understanding of racism and equity is shaped by their home cultures. They may think negative racial/ethnic stereotypes they encounter in the U.S. are just individual issues (Lee & Walsh, 2017).

IDEAS:

- Help students develop a sense of racism and inequity as a systemic issue by exploring patterns in American society.
- Draw on the personal experiences of other students, parents, and community members as a springboard for learning.

Managing Different Perspectives

ISSUE: Students' cultures may perceive social justice, equity, and civic action differently than understood by the American democratic tradition.

IDEAS:

- Connect to students' current cultural understanding as a starting point.
- Provide opportunities to explore values and beliefs without pressure to change.
- Co-develop classroom norms that support exploration of multiple viewpoints.
- Discuss the rationale for exploring these topics and for adhering to classroom norms that support respectful, affirming learning environments.

What Language is Appropriate?

ISSUE: Students' language practices may be systematically overlooked and devalued, even if they correspond to "standardized academic language" (Rosa & Flores, 2015).

IDEAS:

- Identify the ways in which students' language practices cut across contexts (school, home, church, community, etc.).
- Affirm the value of students' language practices and build on them for new learning.
- Teach students about how their language practices may be overlooked or undervalued and skills for navigating and confronting these inequities.

Actions-at-a-Glance

Actions for Educator Personal Learning and Growth

- Engage in professional learning (courses, seminars, retreats, [intergroup dialogues](#), etc.) to develop sociocultural awareness, a sense of how racism is institutionalized and upheld by current educational systems and practices, how to promote racial equity, and ways to [collaborate with others](#) to engage in [anti-bias teaching](#).
- Explore applicable personal characteristics (race, gender, ethnicity, [intersectionality](#), etc.) to reflect about prejudice, [bias](#), [white privilege](#), and other contributions to inequity - preferably with peers from different racial and ethnic backgrounds.
- Interview students, families, and communities of color to learn about their perception of current educational practices and policies, and school and classroom climate.
- Learn about power differentials among members of your school and local community from different racial and ethnic backgrounds through personal conversations, intergroup dialogues, community events, etc.
- Study [educator competencies](#), [standards](#), [frameworks](#), [practices](#), and [mindsets](#) supporting equity and justice.
- Use [racial equity as a lens](#) to examine all key areas of teaching and learning, including social and emotional learning, as well as the policies, practices, and systems that support it across levels (classroom, district, school, and state).

Actions for Supporting Students

- Help students make [connections](#) between the topic of study or target language and their own histories.
- Promote bi/multilingualism and multiculturalism and build on students' current ability to navigate across different racial, cultural, and linguistic spaces by teaching them about ways to act in new spaces (school, classroom, professional, etc.) while maintaining their own identity.
- Incorporate social justice into instruction and provide opportunities for students to pose questions and explore how they impact students' lives.⁵ Design authentic [civic and social action](#) experiences that build on problem-posing and exploration of current inequities.
- Teach students how to think critically (ability to understand and participate in different sociocultural contexts while keeping one's sense of identity; ability to understand one's own values, beliefs, and actions

⁵ Gutiérrez, K. & Rogoff, B. (2003). [Cultural Ways of Learning: Individual Traits or Repertoires of Practice](#). *Educational Researcher*, 32(5), p. 19- 25; Freire, P. (1972). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Herder and Herder.

and how they promote or detract from equity; critical thinking skills: openness to conflicting perspectives, asking good questions, focusing on ideas and not people, etc.).⁶

- Challenge students' actions, words, or practices that sustain current inequities (bias, [microaggressions](#), etc.) and teach them how to challenge or disrupt acts of oppression and manage conflict effectively.
- Develop students' [sociocultural awareness](#): teach about context, power differentials, and how to access and leverage their own power in their spheres of influence (how to "claim their right to speak" outside the classroom based on audience, topic, purpose of interaction; how to discuss issues of racism with friends, family or at school, etc.).⁷
- Model and provide opportunities for students to maintain democratic structures, leadership roles, and responsibility for socially just decision making/power sharing (collaborative learning, norm setting, etc.).⁸
- Use texts that reflect the diversity of students and [evaluate](#) curricular materials for evidence of [bias](#) and [racism](#). Ensure materials incorporate multiple perspectives and issues relevant to students' experiences.⁹
- Incorporate activities focused on exploring identity and belonging to multiple social groups (classroom-based social research journals¹⁰ to explore and reflect on social interactions; writing autobiographies to reflect on personal histories; reading and listening to others from similar racial and ethnic backgrounds discuss their identity development and histories).
- Develop a repertoire of tools for supporting racial equity such as [tools for disrupting implicit bias](#), strategies for [facilitating critical conversations about race](#) with students, etc.

Instructional Planning Resources

DESE Practical Tools and Resources

Culturally Relevant Framework and Critical Consciousness Framework provide guidance for culturally relevant teaching and leading, including specific look fors related to supporting learners in the development of academic proficiency and academic identity in service of academic achievement as well as related student and teacher outcomes, actions, and dispositions.

[Culturally Responsive Teaching & Leading](#) provides resources that define cultural responsiveness and address its importance in our schools and classrooms, including professional development tools supporting culturally responsive teaching (such as the [Culturally Responsive Teaching Rubric](#)), sample [look fors](#), and a library of [classroom videos](#) showcasing culturally responsive instruction.

[DESE Resources for Identifying and Addressing Equity Gaps](#) provides information about current tools educators can use to promote equity.

[Equity Inquiry Protocol Attribution](#) provides guiding questions and a protocol teams can use to support strategic pre-planning efforts in schools and districts and to identify potential causes of inequity leading to student underperformance.

ESL Tools and Resources provides guidance for support effective ESL instruction including the Unit and Lesson Planning Thinking Processes and Templates.

[Massachusetts Plan for Equitable Access to Excellent Educators](#) page provides information about where to find information about equity gaps in access for schools and districts.

[Pathway to Equity in Early Literacy](#) presents resources to support educators in implementing culturally responsive practices for early literacy. This page provides an initial orientation and set of resources to frame this intersection.

⁶ Paris & Alim, 2014; Hammond, Z. (2014). *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain*. California: Corwin.

⁷ Pierce, B. (1995). Social Identity, Investment, and Language Learning. *TESOL Quarterly*, 29(1) (Spring, 1995), p. 9-31.)

⁸ Adams, M., Bell, L., Griffin, P. (1997). [Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice: a Sourcebook](#). New York: Routledge.

⁹ Lopez, A. (2020). [Language, Diversity and Culturally Responsive Education](#). *Migration and Language Education*, 1 (1), p. 3-13.

¹⁰ Pierce, B. (1995).

[Next Generation ESL Model Curriculum Units](#) present examples of formative assessment activities and strategies for gauging English learners' language development and using this information to inform ESL instruction.

DESE Guidance

[Equity Roadmap: Potential Next Steps after the Student Learning Experience Report](#) provides starting points for addressing gaps identified through the [Student Learning Experience \(SLE\) Summary Report](#), including links to optional templates for planning and tracking the work of developing, implementing, and monitoring equity strategies as well as suggestions and resources tailored to specific types of equity gaps.

ESL Best Practices Quick Reference Guides provides guidance on a variety of key topics (formative assessment, early literacy, etc.) as well as English learner student groups (students designated as long-term English learners, English learners with disabilities, etc.).

[Massachusetts Blueprint for English Learner Success](#) and related [Blueprint for English Learner Success Quick Reference Guides](#) present essential conditions and actions educators can take to provide equitable experiences and outcomes for English learners.

Next Generation ESL Curriculum Resource Guide provides support for collaborative ESL curriculum development, including collaborative tools, processes, protocols, and resources used in the development of ESL MCUs.

Federal Resources

[Culturally Responsive School Practices to Promote the Success of Hispanic English Learners](#) presents factors that influence English learners' achievement and identity, an overview of culturally responsive research and strategies for states, districts, schools and classrooms, and promising practices for the social emotional well-being of diverse learners.

[Promising Practices to Increase the Academic Success of Black Students](#) and [Video: Supporting Black students' Excellence](#) presents a summary of policies, practices and programs associated with increased academic outcomes for Black students and an example of how one district's leadership is implementing several related strategies.

Other Featured Resources

Resources for educators at all levels:

[3 Ways to Speak English](#) (TED Talk) presents a "tri-tongued" orator speaking three varieties of English that she calls "home," "school," and "friends," showcasing how one can switch effortlessly from one to the other, claiming with pride that she is "articulate". The talk focuses on linguistic assets people of color use to navigate different areas of their life.

[A Rubric for Culturally Responsive Lessons/Assignments](#)

[BELE Framework](#) provides guidance for transforming student experiences and learning outcomes across educational levels (classroom, school, district, and state).

[Common Core, Culture and Argumentation in the Disciplines](#) (webinar) presents Cultural Modeling (CM) as a framework for designing learning environments that scaffold students' everyday knowledge to support discipline-specific learning in schools.

[Culturally Responsive Leading and Learning: Addressing Equity Through Student and Family Voice](#) provides recommendations for how educators can collaborate with families and students to promote equity.

[Educación en el Mundo Actual: Equity in Bilingual Settings](#) presents resources and recommendations to enhance equity in bilingual settings.

[EquityXDesign: A Practice for Transformation](#) provides a set of design practices and actions that organizations, teams, and individuals can use to mitigate the impact of racism and inequity in their areas of influence.

[#EquityReads 2020](#) provides a list of writings, films, and podcasts that educators can use to learn about and develop equity lens.

[How to Build a Constructivist Learning Environment](#) outlines key actions for building a constructivist learning environment and describes the benefits of using this approach in language education classes for refugee youth.

[I'm Gonna Let it Shine: The Continued Legacy and Promise of Centering Justice in Teaching and Curriculum](#)

(paper) and [seminar video](#) explores the legacy of Black movement during the bleakest of circumstances and how educators can employ a “humanizing critical sociocultural knowledge of teaching to reveal what’s hidden and illuminate a pathway forward to justice”.

Latino Students Cultural and Linguistic Wealth presents a summary of relevant research about Latino students’ assets that can be built on during instruction.

[Language, Diversity and Culturally Responsive Education](#) examines identity and language development and explores strategies that culturally responsive and social justice educators can employ to support emerging bilinguals (EBs) in diverse contexts.

[Listening to Students and Using Content as a Resource in Democratic, Justice-Oriented Social Studies Education](#) explores how listening carefully to students might inform teaching practice focused on democratic, justice-oriented ends. It offers two specific examples of curricular practices that provide ways for teacher candidates to listen to young people and elaborates on the role that teachers’ knowledge of content plays in disrupting oppression and furthering democratic, justice-oriented social studies teaching practice.

[Looking beyond the ‘typical’ English learner: the intersectionality of Black English learners in U.S. public schools](#) discusses challenges faced by Black English learners that educators can attend to promote racial equity.

[National Equity Project - Equity Tools](#) provides resources educators can use to explore issues of racial equity (see Identifying an Equity Challenge and Liberatory Design Card Deck).

[On Becoming Sociocultural Mediators](#) describes what it means for teachers to be sociocultural mediators who consider and build on the many resources – sociocultural, familial, experiential, and others – students bring to their education. It suggests what teachers need to know about their students and their students’ communities to be effective with them, addressing the kinds of changes in attitudes, behaviors, and instructional strategies needed to promote robust learning.

[Principles for Culturally Responsive Teaching](#) describes each principle as well as strategies educators can use to implement this approach in daily practice.

[Racial Equity Tools - Education](#) offers curated tools, research, tips, curricula, and ideas for people who want to increase their understanding and to help those working for racial justice at every level – in systems, organizations, communities, and the culture at large.

[Reports and Infographics](#) from the Mauricio Gastón Institute for Latino Community Development and Public Policy provide relevant information about different immigrant Latino groups in Massachusetts (Brazilians, Puerto Ricans, Salvadorans, Dominicans, etc.).

Resources from the Equity Literacy Institute: [Free Self-Paced Mini-Courses for a Primer on Equity and Equity Literacy](#), [Equity Literacy: Definition and Abilities](#) and [Basic Principles for Equity Literacy](#)

[What Anti-racism Really Means for Educators](#) highlights key ideas for developing a shared understanding of what anti-racism in schools looks like.

[Whose Culture has Capital? A Critical Race Theory Discussion of Community Cultural Wealth](#)

Resources for teaching about social justice and racial equity:

[Social Justice Standards: A Framework for Anti-bias Education](#) provide a road map for anti-bias education at every stage of K–12 instruction. They include anchor standards and age-appropriate learning outcomes, the Standards provide a common language and organizational structure educators can use to guide curriculum development and make schools more just and equitable.

[Forging the Connections Between Learning and Justice: On View, Voice, and Visibility](#) (video) focuses on ways to promote social justice through classroom teaching and learning.

[Youth Participatory Action Research \(YPAR\) and Critical Epistemologies: Rethinking Education Research](#) outlines a framework and practices to support engaging youth in education research and ideas for addressing inequality and promoting justice via YPAR pedagogy and methods.

[Good Trouble: Understanding and Supporting Youth Activism for Equity and Justice](#) (webinar) presents a dialogue focused on the intersections of civic engagement, activism, youth development, and public schooling to support educators understanding of youth activism and its potential for academic and social-emotional learning.

[Let's Talk! Discussing Race, Racism and Other Difficult Topics With Students](#) provides resources for exploring social justice topics connected to race with students.

[Constructing Societal Curriculum Sites and Instructional Practices that Elicit Student Thinking about Race and Education](#) provides ideas for what middle and high school teachers might teach to build knowledge and discourse of race with students and how teachers might design learning opportunities for and with students that build from and on societal issues.

[Resources for Talking about Race, Racism, Racialized Violence with Kids](#) presents relevant resources, articles, interviews, and advice from experts focused on promoting racial justice in education.

Resources for school and district leaders:

[Districts Advancing Racial Equity \(DARE\) tool](#) captures research-informed, high-leverage aspects of schooling that leaders must address to create systems that build on the strengths of and respond to the needs of students of color.

[Note on Racial Equity on School Systems](#) provides ideas to support leaders to develop and strengthen a critical lens for seeing the inequalities that exist within their organizations so they can address barriers to progress and their root causes more directly.

[Social, Emotional, and Academic Development Through an Equity Lens](#) provides a framework and action items for school leaders to revisit what's already in place first, and ask whether they equitably foster belonging, give challenging opportunities for students to thrive, and provide the supports students need.

Resources from the Leadership Academy: [Culturally Responsive Leadership in K-12 Education](#) (webinar), [Portrait of a Culturally Responsive School](#), [Equity at Work](#), [Culturally Responsive Leadership: A Framework For School & School System Leaders](#) (provides guidance for school and school system leaders to shift their practices and beliefs to create culturally responsive learning environments for their students and staff; it imbues culturally responsive actions across all levels of education leadership, clearly articulating the progression from aspiring principal to superintendent)

[Data Equity Walk Toolkit](#) provides a 45- to 90-minute activity for any size audience – high school and college students, teachers, district leaders, community members, or others – to engage with education data and discuss equity issues.

[What Schools Can do to Address Racism, COVID19, and Social Justice](#) (webinar) provides recommendations for addressing equity and social justice issues in education from a mental health perspective.

[Community Schools as an Effective Strategy for Equitable School Improvement](#) provides information about a school model that supports greater equity for all students, especially those from racial and ethnic groups who have been traditionally (resources: [Infographic](#) of what they look like in action, [research brief](#) and [policy brief](#) describing effective practices, lessons from implementation, and policies undergirding the approach, and an interactive [Playbook](#) outlining policy principles, practices and examples of implementation).

[Educating the Whole Child: Improving School Climate to Support Student Success](#) provides research-based practices to create settings in which all students' healthy growth and development are central to the design of classrooms and the school. This [example of SJHumanitas](#) school showcases how the whole child and community schools approach can be brought to life.

[The New Frontier: An Integrated Framework for Equity & Transformative Improvement in Education](#) provides a framework and recommendations to help integrate efforts focused on preparing “all students to become compassionate, self-reflective, civically engaged, globally literate people who can create more joyful, socially, and economically prosperous communities” (see Broadening Notions of Student Success, p. 13-19 and The Focus of Reform Work/How Education Improvement is Pursued, p. 25-36).

[Equity in Education: Key Questions to Consider](#) presents a list of key equity-minded questions to consider within education target areas (teaching and leading, learning and transitioning, measuring and improving, and financing) to support state education leaders as they evaluate their policy options.

[Policies to Eliminate Racial Disparities in Education: A Literature Review](#) presents a summary of recommendations related to key racial inequity areas that could be pursued as promising practices to reduce racial disparities (see pages 5-9).

[Racial Justice in Education Resources](#) provides articles, tools, videos, and other resources for sharpening racial analysis and deepening one’s understanding of this topic.

[Racial Equity Analysis Tool](#) provides a set of guiding questions education leaders can use to determine if existing and proposed policies, budgetary decisions, programs, professional development, and instructional practices are likely to close the opportunity gap for specific racial groups. The related [Facilitator Guide](#) includes look fors and racial equity best practices connected to the Tool.

[The Equity-Driven Systems Change \(ESC\) Model: A Toolkit for Improving Institutional Practice and Student Outcomes](#) includes several types of tools designed to support specific stages of the change process towards greater equity including Institutional and Systems Improvement Rubrics that support assessment of strategies, implementation processes, and professional learning needs, Facilitators’ Guides that provide step-by-step instructions on how to lead specific activities of teams engaged in improvement efforts and related Participant Handouts, and Critical Considerations that provide tips and strategies to consider throughout the change process, particularly in maintaining and deepening an equity lens.

[For additional resources you may wish to consult, click here.](#)



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