



# THE ABCs OF EQUITY

## A dictionary for leading equity-focused work in schools and school systems

**One of the critical early steps in leading equity-focused work in a school or school system is establishing a common language with your colleagues and community stakeholders.** There are so many buzz words out there – equity, racism, assimilation. But jargon can be an enemy of change.

Here we offer some guidance on how we have come to define equity-focused language in our work, based on years of partnership with school and system leaders across the country. We typically use this dictionary as a starting point and encourage education leaders to work with their teams and communities to tweak the definitions to meet their needs and context. You can use these definitions to begin your own exploration into how you describe and define the work you are leading. Where we have borrowed definitions from leaders and scholars we admire and have learned from, we offer citations for you to explore.



## USING THIS DICTIONARY

**When we work with leaders, we tend to follow some variation of this process:**

- Generate a set of norms that will encourage conversation. For guidance on norms, see Pacific Education Group, Catalyst.org, National Equity Project, Racial Equity Tools, and Learning for Justice.
- Introduce terms
- Provide examples of what this term could look like in practice from multiple perspectives.
- Ask participants to give their own examples
- Discuss examples and how they do, or do not, align with the definitions
- Give people time to digest
- Give people a second, third, etc. opportunity to ask questions about the terms and provide additional examples
- Give scenarios where people have to identify examples of terms within the scenario
- Integrate terms into learning and conversation



## DICTIONARY

**ASSIMILATION:** Expressing the racist idea that a racial group is culturally or behaviorally inferior and is supporting cultural or behavioral enrichment programs to develop that racial group. (Kendi)

**COLOR:** Designates race which is a social construct. The meaning and designation are affixed to the noticeable physical characteristics seen in a person's skin, hair and eyes. (Singleton)

**COLORBLINDNESS:** Failing to see race and in turn failing to see racism. (Kendi)

**COLORISM:** a powerful collection of racist policies that lead to inequities between Light people and Dark people, supported by racist ideas about Light people and Dark people. (Kendi)

**CORNER:** Designates citizenship, either by birth or naturalization, as specified on a government-issued passport. A person must be able to locate their nationality on a globe and name it as such (Singleton)

**CULTURE:** The multiple components of one's identity, including but not limited to race, economic background, gender, language, sexual orientation, nationality, religion, and ability that influence how people make meaning of the world around them. (Culturally Responsive – Sustaining Education Framework). Culture describes how we live daily in terms of our language, ancestry, religion, food, dress, musical tastes, traditions, values, political and social affiliations, recreation and so on (Singleton). Culture operates on three levels:

- **Surface culture:** the observable and concrete elements of culture such as food, dress, music and holidays
- **Shallow culture:** unspoken rules that guide and govern social interactions and norms such as courtesy, personal space, nonverbal communication
- **Deep culture:** tacit knowledge and unconscious assumptions that govern one's worldview, including ethics, spirituality, health and group harmony (Hammond)

**CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE LEADERSHIP AND PRACTICE:** Able to recognize how institutionalized racism affects your own life and the lives of the students and families you work with, and embracing your role in mitigating, disrupting and dismantling systemic oppression. Culturally responsive leaders have a strong understanding of the dimensions and impact of cultural constructs in society and are committed to cultivating and deepening their own cultural competence and that of the adults they lead; believe in the academic success of all students and center student learning and academic rigor across every school, classroom, and learning environment in their system; and cultivate sociopolitical consciousness in students and educators.

**CULTURALLY SUSTAINING PEDAGOGY:** Centering the identities of all students in classroom instruction, encouraging cultural pluralism rather than asking students to minimize their identities in order to be successful. (NYS Culturally Responsive – Sustaining Education Framework)

**CULTURALLY AFFIRMING PEDAGOGY:** Teaching focused on academic success, cultural competence and sociopolitical consciousness. (Ladson-Billings)

**DISCRIMINATION:** The unequal treatment of members of various groups based on race, gender, social class, sexual orientation, physical ability, religion and other categories.

**EQUITY:** Every school and school system is intentionally built to ensure children of every race, ethnicity, language or other characteristics of their identity, have what they need to achieve academic, social, and emotional success.

**INDIVIDUAL OR INTERPERSONAL RACISM:** The beliefs, attitudes and actions of individuals that support or perpetuate racism. This could include telling a racist joke or slur.

**IMPLICIT BIASES:** Attitudes or stereotypes that subconsciously affect our understanding, actions and decisions.

**INSTITUTIONAL RACISM:** The policies and practices within and across institutions that produce outcomes that chronically favor or put a racial group at a disadvantage.

**INTERNALIZED OPPRESSION:** A complex multi-generational socialization process that teaches people of color to believe, accept and live or act out negative societal definitions of self (Ramsey County Human Services Anti-Racism Leadership Team)

**INTERSECTIONALITY:** "Intersectionality is simply a prism to see the interactive effects of various forms of discrimination and disempowerment. It looks at the way that racism, many times, interacts with patriarchy, heterosexism, classism, xenophobia – seeing that the overlapping vulnerabilities created by these systems actually create specific kinds of challenges." (Williams Crenshaw)

**LIBERATION:** "To teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin..." (Hooks)

**MICROAGGRESSIONS:** The everyday slights, insults, indignities and invalidations delivered toward people of color because of their visible racial/ethnic minority characteristics. (Sue)

**MINORITIZED:** Emphasizes what the school systems and other systems within the United States have overtly and covertly done to Asian, Black, Indigenous, Latinx and Students of Color. The term was coined by Michael Benitez, Jr., to refer to the "history of structural and institutional actions that have over time limited access to and led to a lack of presence among students of color in higher education labeled as racially and ethnically different from the norm." The term is meant to build a "more critical understanding of how 'minority' came to be constructed socially over the course of history and how students continue to be minoritized in contemporary spaces of higher education."

**MULTICULTURAL COMPETENCY:** A process of learning about and becoming allies with people from other cultures, thereby broadening our own understanding and ability to participate in a multicultural process. The key element to becoming more culturally competent is respect for the ways that others live in and organize the world and an openness to learn from them. (Kivel)

**OPPRESSION:** A set of policies, practices, traditions, norms, definitions, cultural stories, and explanations that function to systematically hold down one social group to the benefit of another. Prejudice and discrimination have moved from the individual to the society level and have long-term and far-reaching impacts. (DiAngelo)

**PEOPLE OF COLOR:** A term used to capture a widely diverse group of people, such as Latinx, Black/African American, Asian American, Indigenous/Native, Middle Eastern, etc. (NYU Culturally Responsive Curriculum Scorecard Vocabulary)

**PREJUDICE:** A pre-judgment or unjustifiable, and usually negative, attitude of one type of individual or groups toward another group and its members. Such negative attitudes are typically based on unsupported generalizations (or stereotypes) that deny the right of individual members of certain groups to be recognized and treated as individuals with individual characteristics.

**PRIVILEGE:** Unearned social power accorded by the formal and informal institutions of society to ALL members of a dominant group (e.g. white privilege, male privilege, etc.). Privilege is usually invisible to those who have it because we're taught not to see it, but nevertheless it puts them at an advantage over those who do not have it. (Colours of Resistance Archive, Privilege)

**RACE:** A social construct that artificially divides people into distinct groups based on characteristics such as physical appearance (e.g., skin color, hair texture, eye shape, etc.), ancestral heritage, and ethnic classification. The concept of race is not based in or supported by science but a person's racial identity powerfully shapes their lived experiences.

**RACIAL INEQUITY:** Two or more racial groups are not standing on approximately equal footing (Kendi)

**RACISM:** A marriage of racist policies and racist ideas that produces and normalizes racial inequities. (Kendi)

**RACIST:** One who is supporting a racist policy through their actions or inaction or expressing a racist idea (Kendi)

**RACIST IDEA:** Any idea that suggests one racial group is inferior or superior to another racial group in any way. (Kendi)

**RACIST POLICY:** Any measure that produces or sustains racial inequity between racial groups. (Kendi)  
**Stereotypes:** Portrayals of individuals or groups of people in one-dimensional, simplistic ways based on one aspect of their culture. (NYU Culturally Responsive Curriculum Scorecard Vocabulary)

**STEREOTYPES:** Portrayals of individuals or groups of people in one-dimensional, simplistic ways based on one aspect of their culture. (NYU Culturally Responsive Curriculum Scorecard Vocabulary)

**WHITE DOMINANT CULTURE:** The idea that white people and the ideas, thoughts, beliefs, and actions of white people are superior to People of Color and their ideas, thoughts, beliefs, and actions. White dominant culture is reproduced by all the institutions of our society. In particular the media, the education system, western science (which played a major role in reinforcing the idea of race as a biological truth with the white race as the "ideal" top of the hierarchy), and the Christian church have played central roles in reproducing the idea of white supremacy (i.e. that white is "normal," "better," "smarter," "holy" in contrast to Black and other People and Communities of Color. White dominant culture is an artificial, historically constructed culture which expresses, justifies and binds together the United States white supremacy system. It is the glue that binds together white-controlled institutions into systems and white-controlled systems into the global white supremacy system. (Sharon Martinas and the Challenging White Supremacy Workshop)

**WHITENESS:** The way in which white people and their customs, cultures and beliefs operate as the standard of “normalcy” in society, operating as the standard by which all other groups are compared and functioning to create a culture in which all other groups are seen as inferior or abnormal.

## REFERENCES

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NYS Culturally Responsive – Sustaining Education Framework

<http://www.nysed.gov/common/nysed/files/programs/crs/culturally-responsive-sustaining-education-framework.pdf>

NYU Culturally Responsive Curriculum Scorecard <https://steinhardt.nyu.edu/metrocenter/ejroc/culturally-responsive-curriculum-scorecards>

Ramsey County Human Services Anti-Racism Leadership Team

<https://www.ramseycounty.us/sites/default/files/Assistance%20and%20Support/Understanding%20IRO%20and%20IRS%20powerpoint.pdf>

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