

# Language & Culture Newsletter



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## The Hum of the Air Conditioner

### Necessary Conversations about All the Possibilities

A friend came into town to visit. We were sitting in my front room catching up when suddenly she blurted out, “What is wrong with your air conditioner?” I had no idea what she was talking about, “How can you concentrate with it making so much noise?” I hadn’t realized it was making so much noise, and it seemed rude for her to judge me and my air conditioner. Hmm...it turned out my air conditioner indeed needed a tune-up. I had been living with the sound for so long that it had become part of my world--unnoticeable until someone who didn’t hear the same hum day in and day out made mention of it.

Beverly Daniel Tatum states that “as adults, we have a responsibility to try to identify and interrupt the cycle of oppression...We have a responsibility to seek out more accurate information and to adjust our behavior accordingly.” As educators, it is imperative that we become critically conscious about the assumptions we have about our students and their families. We must look for accurate information, for their story instead of ours: *Is minimal parental involvement because of lack of caring or lack of access to the system? Is cutting school due to lack of motivation or lack of feeling connected to the curriculum?*

It is challenging to notice that the air conditioner is making noises without the help of outside perspectives. Therefore, I must rely on my colleagues to help me notice what I take for granted as a given. This is part of growing equity in our educational system. Engaging in a conversation about equity can be scary because it grapples with issues of racism, privilege, oppression and power. It can be frustrating to tease out how I contribute to inequities on a personal level, a professional level and an institutional level. Periodically I think that I kind of get it...the air conditioner was broken, now I can hear the buzz. But then someone shares some insight and I realize my refrigerator clanks about 30 seconds after I shut the door. Now I get to look at what that’s about. After a while, I walk slowly and critically through each room of my house looking for the sounds—for an opposite truth, for the missing story, for a misrepresentation, for a different perspective, for a subtle yet discriminatory thought. And it can be tiring. And, it is absolutely necessary.

Another challenging aspect of having critical conversations about race, student achievement and equity is that it can be emotional. Many think that the professional work place is not the appropriate context to have emotional conversations. I feel comfortable pontificating intellectually about where our system has gaps of equity, quoting Beverly Daniel Tatum. But when I think of Juan or Marta or Gabriella—students for whom the system failed, I do get emotional. And when I have to own up to a situation in which I was oppressive, I do get emotional. And it can be tiring. And, it is absolutely necessary.

The 4 Agreements of having Courageous Conversations about Race are:

- \*Stay Engaged
- \*Experience Discomfort
- \*Speak Your Truth and
- \*Expect and Accept Non-Closure

I invite you to engage in an honest, uncomfortable, unending conversation about equity, race, privilege, power, change, teacher efficacy, hope, future possibilities and student successes...

~Rachel Nance

#### Useful Websites:

- <http://www.slk.k12.ut.us/depts/equity/langculture/>
- [http://www.mediathatmattersfest.org/watch/6/a\\_girl\\_like\\_me](http://www.mediathatmattersfest.org/watch/6/a_girl_like_me)

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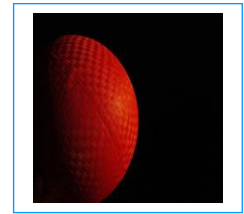


#### Tell Me

Why should it be *my* loneliness,  
Why should it be *my* song,  
Why should it be *my* dream,  
deferred  
overlong?

Langston Hughes

## What Does Kickball have to do with Equity? Thinking of “The Rules” as a Given for All



It was a sunny, spring day towards the end of last year. CRT testing was over and we all felt a sense of relief. It was time to have some fun. We organized two teams to play kickball. I always enjoy doing this at each year’s end because it’s fun to be able to join in some of the games my students play. We walked out to the diamond, put out the bases, picked heads or tails and the game began.

The organization of the game seemed a bit off, “Wow, these kids really don’t know how to play kickball. Why do they keep throwing the ball at each other and then calling an out?” I thought silently. So I gathered everyone together, “No, no, no, that’s not how you play the game. You have to throw the ball to a person at the base. The other person has to catch the ball and then tag the person to get the other out! It’s like softball or baseball. You can’t hit each other. You have to follow the rules!” Although perplexed, the kids acquiesced and decided to play the game by “the rules.”

I was so pleased with myself at the end of the game. I felt that we had all learned how to play kickball properly. They learned the “right” rules and learned how to play together as a team. I was such a good teacher!

A few days later, I was sitting in a room full of teachers discussing **equity**. I knew what the word meant, and of course, I didn’t have any cultural biases. I was an educated person who taught on the west side of Salt Lake City. My classroom was extremely diverse; I knew about my student’s families, made connections with my students on a daily basis, treated them with respect and tried to be as fair as I possibly could. I certainly didn’t stereotype or discriminate against any of my students.

I began talking about my kickball experience; I laughed as I relayed my story about how the kids didn’t play by the rules. A colleague asked me to think about **whose** rules I thought they were breaking. “The correct rules,” was all I could think of. Then she brought up the fact that in kickball, one of the rules states that you CAN throw the ball at someone in order to get them “out.” I was shocked. How come I had never heard of this rule? As we delved further in to the discussion, I realized I was placing the rules I had learned in my “White” and probably “out dated” days of playing kickball. I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. Here I pride myself on being culturally sensitive and aware, but had totally changed the rules to a game that my students knew and played often. I was surprised no one stood up to me that day on the playground to set me straight. But, then again, I am the teacher and I do know what’s best, right? That day, in the middle of a meeting about equity, I realized I have always looked through a set of lenses that are very different from the students I teach. I had a lot to learn about them and my own cultural biases. If I couldn’t even take for granted the rules to a kickball game, what else was I projecting on my students?

The next day, when I returned to class, I gathered my students up and made a public apology about not understanding the rules of their game. I told them I had learned that I was wrong and wanted to make sure I owned up to my mistake. They accepted my apology and told me they were glad because their rules were much more fun!

I’ve reflected on this story many times since beginning this Courageous Conversation about Race. I don’t feel guilty for the lenses I have because they are from my own stories and experiences; however, I am much more aware that I have these lenses. I am constantly evaluating the way I see a situation and ask myself, what part does race play into this experience? This is a journey, an exciting one to be on. It is also a difficult one in which we must ask ourselves some complicated questions. Rules to a kickball were just the tip of the iceberg!

~Laurie Martin  
Riley Elementary

This newsletter brought to you  
by SLCS D’s  
Educational Equity Department

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The mission of Educational Equity is to provide differentiated educational opportunities to students who are ethnically, culturally, linguistically and socio-economically diverse so that high comparable outcomes are achieved by all.

### A Must Listen!

#### Equity Book Club: The Danger of a Single Story

#### Novelist Chimamanda Adichie:

Our lives, our cultures, are composed of many overlapping stories. Novelist Chimamanda Adichie tells the story of how she found her authentic cultural voice and warns that if we hear only a single story about another person or country, we risk a critical misunderstanding. Listen to the web-speech at this link:

[http://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda\\_adichie\\_the\\_danger\\_of\\_a\\_single\\_story.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story.html)

We invite you (any district employee) to join us in a discussion about this month’s suggested web-speech. Examine the stories we tell about our work, our students and our responsibilities as educators.

When: December 11, 2009  
Where: Mestizo Coffee House  
631 West North Temple  
Time: 3:00-4:00

**No reminder will be available so calendar it now!**



## Equity Vocabulary Quiz

### WORD BANK:

Find the matching definition.

- colorblind
- cultural competence
- asset orientation
- access
- the achievement gap
- institutional racism
- equity

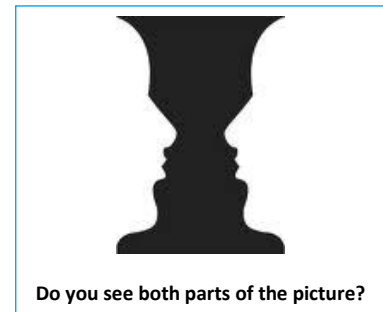
1. When students have the knowledge, tools and skills necessary to take advantage of all educational experiences because the system has provided them. Not synonymous with opportunity.
2. The difference of achievement between groups of students. Currently, the achievement gap is predictable by race—White and Asians scoring significantly higher than other persons of color.
3. Refers to an ability to interact (and teach) effectively with people of different races and cultures.
4. Providing each student the support s/he needs to be academically successful so that all student groups achieve high comparable outcomes. Not synonymous with equality.
5. Structural barriers of an organization, such as policies and practices, that fail to provide the appropriate service to people because of their color or culture.
6. Perceiving the shared characteristics of diverse communities as assets on which to build rigorous academic learning.
7. Commonly used to describe being anti-racist. In reality, it denies students of color a critical quality of their identity.

## To Try Tomorrow

### Looking at it in a Different Way

Reflect on your favorite story to read to/with your students. Critically examine what is in the story and what is not using the following questions:

- What part of the story might be missing?
- How might the missing part of the story change the story told?
- What is considered “normal” in the story?
- How does it address something not “normal”?
- What is a different perspective?
- What is a counterstory (an opposite/conflicting story)?
- What kind of stereotypes are being perpetuated?
- What kind of stereotypes are being debunked?
- What values are being taught in the story? Whose values are they?
- What kind of story of empowerment or oppression is being told?



Do you see both parts of the picture?

Considering these questions, in what kind of critically conscious dialogue can you engage your students of all ages?

## Equity Realized

A SLCS Teacher’s Story of Consciousness:

I think the first time I really became conscious of race I was 20 years old and living in Virginia. I went to get my hair cut (I am obsessive about the way my hair is cut!) and the woman cut it all wrong. I didn’t want her to try and fix it, I just wanted to get out of there as fast as possible and go to another shop. As I was driving away, the friend I was with asked me why I didn’t let her just fix it. In anger, I said she obviously didn’t know how. I’m ashamed now of what I said next, but I remember it like a tape player running through my head. Here’s my direct quote: “I want someone who knows how to cut White hair.”

Yeah. Ouch.

As soon as the words came out, I realized that I thought the woman couldn’t cut my hair because she was Black. NO other reason. For about a week I tried to rationalize my sentence away as something else, but it kept coming back to me. I was shocked with myself. How did I get here? It was a BIG moment in my decision to take a look at who I am and how I came to be this person. I’ve made a concentrated effort to evaluate how I treat people, really thinking about my actions perhaps being different depending on the color of the person in front of me. I’m not always successful. It’s a process.

Vocabulary Quiz: 1. access 2. the achievement gap 3. cultural competence 4. equity 5. institutional racism 6. asset orientation 7. colorblind

The Salt Lake City School District does not discriminate on the basis of age, color, disability, national origin, pregnancy, race, religion, or sex in its programs and activities. The following person has been designated to handle inquires regarding non-discrimination policy: Kathleen Christy, Assistant to the Superintendent, 440 East 100 South, Salt Lake City, Utah 84111, 578-8251. You may also contact the Office for Civil Rights, Denver, CO, (303)844-5695.