# A PRIMER ON

# INCLUSIVE INSTRUCTION



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# **BranchED**

Branch Alliance for Educator Diversity (BranchED) is the only non-profit organization in the country dedicated to strengthening, growing, and amplifying the impact of educator preparation at Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs), with the longer-range goals of both diversifying the teaching profession and intentionally addressing critical issues of educational equity for all students. Our vision is for all students to access diverse, highly effective educators.

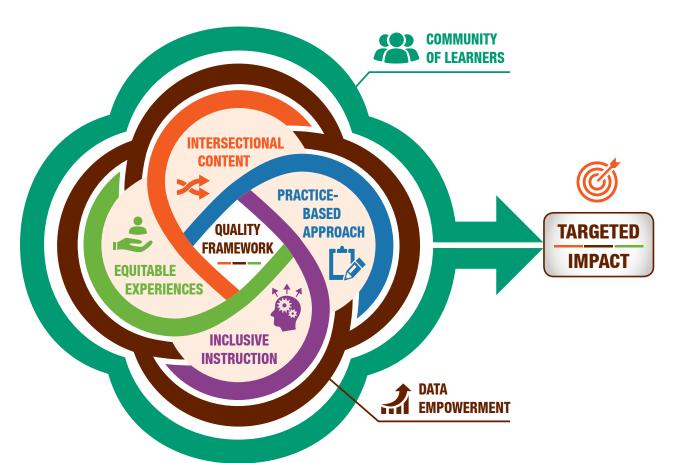
This goal is accomplished through application of our Framework for the Quality Preparation of Educators. The Framework outlines a roadmap to create teacher preparation programs that meet the needs of our increasingly diverse student body. It seeks to build equity-oriented educator preparation programs that prepare educators to reflect, respect, and reify the value of the diversity of America's PK-12 school children. The framework offers educator preparation providers (EPPs) a common vision of what high quality, culturally sustaining educator preparation is, and a coherent and sustained approach to implementing evidence-based practices that accomplish vitally important educational equity work.



## **BranchED Framework**

#### for Quality Preparation of Education

The Framework identifies six critical focus areas that teacher preparation providers can leverage to redesign their programs. This primer centers on inclusive instruction. Inclusive instruction minimizes or removes barriers to learning or assessment and supports the success of all students, while ensuring that academic standards are not diminished. Such instruction is facilitated by teacher educators and practitioners who are self-reflective, understand the need for continued development, and are responsive to how their own identities, beliefs, and biases may play out in the classroom. Inclusive instruction is situated within a classroom climate that is conducive to learning and fosters a sense of belonging. It addresses the self, instruction, and assessment and includes the integration of culturally sustaining practices, social and emotional learning, trauma informed practices, and delivery of instruction that is student centered.



# Introduction to the Primer

#### **INTENDED USERS**

This primer is intended for teacher educators, whom we define as individuals who play a role in the preparation of teacher candidates by providing instruction or guidance. Teacher educators may hold roles such as: Teacher Education faculty and Arts and Sciences faculty employed by a university, site coordinators, coaches/clinical instructors, PK-12 school-based teachers (e.g., mentor, coordinating teacher), and PK-12 administrators. PK-12 educators may find the primer applicable to their own practice.

#### **OVERVIEW OF THE PRIMER**

This primer provides an overview of inclusive instruction as defined by BranchED. We see inclusive instruction as an overarching umbrella encompassing multiple pedagogical frameworks that when implemented exemplify quality inclusive instruction leading to positive student academic and affective outcomes. We believe inclusion and rigor are threads in the same cloth. The primer provides a summary of varied pedagogical frameworks essential to inclusive instruction as well as recommendations on how to implement them in the classroom.



# **Inclusive Instruction**



## **Self-Awareness**

We all have mental models about how the world works. The assumptions, stereotypes, images, and stories we carry in our heads affect what we see and shape how we act. Additionally, the social identities we hold predispose us to unequal roles: some more privileged; some less privileged. Against this backdrop, inclusive instruction begins with the process of self-understanding and undertaking an ongoing examination of what I know, how I know it, and what my own positions of power and privilege are in relationship to others. It calls for honesty about our identities, values, assumptions, and dispositions.

How do we name our identities and the assumptions we hold? The questions below provide a starting point.

#### Practitioner

#### **Strategies for Self-Awareness**

Use these questions as a starting point in examining your own identity and lived experiences as they relate to power, privilege, and marginalization in your professional and personal contexts.

#### Reflecting on myself:

- What are my social identities? (e.g., race(s), ethnicity, nationality/citizenship, religion, assigned sex, gender expression, age, education, physical health, ability, first language, family, political praxis etc.).
- Which identities have the strongest effect on how I see myself as a person? Why?
- Which identities do I believe have the strongest effect on how people see me as a person? Why?
- How has my upbringing and positionality influenced the opportunities available to me?
  - Which identities do I believe advantage me?
  - Which identities do I believe disadvantage me?
- What aspects of my identity affected how I experienced privilege and/or disadvantage in my educational journey?
- How have those experiences helped shape my identity development?

#### Reflecting on my teaching self:

- How do my students perceive me?
- How do I perceive them?
  - What shapes and has shaped my perceptions about my students?
- How are my values and identity illuminated in my lectures, syllabus, course materials, conversations, and assignments?
- What are some instances/occurrences when I believe I have intentionally/ unintentionally created an exclusionary space or contributed to situations that marginalized some students while advantaging others?
  - What skills and knowledge do I possess now that has allowed me to recognize those moments/instances that I failed to recognize before?

#### Moving forward:

- How can I learn about students' experiences of the learning environment in my course so I can continuously work to create an inclusive climate?
- What are some biases, stereotypes, and assumptions I need to unlearn?
- What knowledge and skills do I need to continue to focus on and build to further develop my consciousness?

An introspective journey through the questions posed above may be conducted individually and/or collaboratively with others. Williams' notion of radical honesty as a truth-telling pedagogical practice provides a helpful framework to accomplish the latter in teacher preparation classrooms. Radical honesty refers to both teacher educators and students bringing their full humanity to the classroom and honestly sharing their identities, dispositions, assumptions, beliefs, and racialized or gendered experiences to engage in reflexivity and critical thinking. Radical honesty is not just an act of truth telling; it looks towards an action-oriented form of teaching and learning.

#### **Cultural Competence**

Self-awareness and understanding are the foundational processes that shape one's approach to inclusive instruction. Equally important is cultural competence—having an appreciation for and understanding of different worldviews, beliefs, customs, and practices, as well as the ability to work effectively and sensitively with other people across cultural differences.

#### Practitioner

## **Strategies for Cultural Competence**

These questions are offered as a self-assessment of where you are right now in your own journey towards cultural competence.

- What are some of your core beliefs and behaviors that have been culturally influenced?
- How culturally diverse was your environment growing up?
- What messages have you received from your family, friends, community, and schools about cultures that are different from yours?
- How much do you know about the visible and invisible cultures of your students?
- How do you know what you know?
- What do you do with what you have found?
- Whom will you turn to for help to hold you accountable in your journey towards cultural competence?

Ideas about cultural competence typically focus on the explicit or visible aspects of culture, including but not limited to language, dress, food habits, communication styles, time, and space orientation. Implicit or invisible aspects of culture are equally important. These refer to the beneath-the-surface aspects of culture that we learn and use without realizing, such as how one experiences and displays emotional pain, communication patterns, power relationships, respect for authority, concepts of justice, gender roles, and many others. Inclusive instruction necessitates being attentive to and conscious of both visible and invisible aspects of culture.

#### **Equity Literacy**

Gorski and Swalwell<sup>2</sup> define equity literacy as "understandings of equity and inequity and of justice." For inclusive instruction, equity literacy involves filtering every instructional decision and action (big or small) through these questions: What unintended consequences might there be? And who might be excluded or disadvantaged? These are powerful questions to surface instructional policies and practices that began with good intentions but have unforeseen consequences especially for minoritized students. Inclusive instruction demands that once we reveal unjust or inequitable practices, we step back and address their roots to eliminate them, not just make them a little better or more palatable.

## Practitioner

#### Strategies for for Equity Literacy

- Filter every instructional decision and action (big or small) through these
  questions: What unintended consequences might there be? And who might be
  excluded or disadvantaged?
- Confront the inequities that are in front of you. Ask critical questions to address their roots.
- Create solutions to eliminate the inequities.
  - What action will you take? And after that?

## **Sociopolitical Clarity**

Sociopolitical clarity is social, political, and cultural consciousness. For inclusive instruction, sociopolitical clarity is a deconstructive exercise. It starts with locating the linkages between macro-level systems of power (historical, institutional, political, economic, social,

and cultural) and micro-level settings, including classrooms, schools, districts, and broader policy contexts. The next step is making conscious efforts to prevent the inequities that exist in society at large from arising at the classroom level. In academic settings, one can either maintain the status quo or take seriously the responsibility to anticipate and dismantle it in intentional, strategic, and critical ways. Inclusive instruction necessitates the latter.

#### Practitioner

#### **Strategies for Sociopolitical Clarity**

- Identify manifestations of marginalization, oppression, privilege, and power that serve to reproduce the status quo and disadvantage minoritized students.
- Recognize or assess your own role in the perpetuation of the oppressive practices of the status quo.
- Identify ways in which you may use your role to dismantle the oppressive forces.
- Create a democratic learning environment.
  - Share power in decision making (e.g., decide collectively with students, rather than handing down, discussion topics, participation structures, etc.).
  - Share power in knowledge construction (e.g., create contexts where all students are treated or empowered as thinkers, knowers, or intellectual leaders in the classroom).
  - Provide equity of voice.
- Ensure that students are psychologically safe in your classroom.
  - Position students to engage productively with each other (in group work, in conversations, etc.).
  - Recognize and respond to microaggressions directed towards minoritized groups.
  - Recognize and respond to unequal power relations.
- Make space in the classroom for marginalized perspectives.
  - Recognize and build on marginalized students' existing knowledge bases.
  - Incorporate the voices, experiences, expertise, and perspectives of people of color throughout the coursework.
- Check all course content and activities to ensure they do not perpetuate bias about marginalized groups.



developing a sense of belonging, which is likely to increase motivation,

engagement, and achievement. Further, classroom climate has been found to be the best predictor of overall satisfaction by college

#### **Inclusive Classroom Climate**

students4.

The classroom, both PK-12 and post-secondary, is a vibrant space populated by a wide range of individuals with unique personalities, interests, beliefs, abilities, strengths, and needs. An educator is charged with attending to the whole student, considering the intersection of student, context, and content, and fostering a classroom climate conducive to learning. Taking time to build relationships with your students demonstrates an ethic of care. Being receptive to the lived experiences of the learner and the funds of knowledge he or she possesses serves as an entry point for course content. Social and institutional contexts impact classroom interactions by revealing structural issues of power, privilege, and difference. Facilitating an environment in which multiple perspectives are valued and differences of opinion are not personalized provides a mental model for students that they

can then apply to their own classrooms. Utilizing materials in the classroom that represent diverse perspectives by diverse authors also messages to students that all voices are valued. Central to inclusive instruction and classroom climate is the conviction that students' backgrounds, experiences, and communities are sources and resources for learning.

#### Practitioner

# Strategies for Creating an Inclusive Classroom Climate

- Know and use students' names.
- Share your own background and experiences with students.
- Invite students to share their backgrounds and lived experiences throughout the semester.
- Allow students to set expectations they have for you as an educator and invite
  frequent formative feedback on your instruction. Be transparent about how you
  respond to that feedback.
- Demonstrate an interest in and communicate concern for students.
- Co-construct the learning environment with students.
- Develop rapport with students.
- Demonstrate warmth and openness using appropriate self-disclosure.
- Consider whose voices, perspectives, and scholarship are represented and underrepresented in your course materials.
- Examine how perspectives and experiences of various groups are represented in course content.
- Trouble possible assumptions you may have regarding learning behaviors, capacities, and students' social identity characteristics.
- Encourage positive peer interactions and address comments that are discriminatory and insensitive.
- Co-develop norms of classroom engagement and revisit them regularly.
- Co-create guidelines for productive class discussions.
  - Introduce the idea of cognitive dissonance and productive cognitive struggle; reinforce these often as part of an effective and healthy learning environment.

#### Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)

Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) is the process through which individuals develop and apply skills to manage emotions, achieve goals, demonstrate empathy, engage in supporting relationships, and take responsive action<sup>5</sup>. CASEL has identified five areas of competencies aligned to SEL. These are:



When applied through an ecological framework, SEL can play a role in addressing inequities and developing a sense of agency and a growth mindset in students. Existing research suggests that SEL positively impacts academic and affective outcomes<sup>6</sup> and can help improve economic mobility<sup>7</sup>. Further, development of soft skills (e.g., cooperation, problem-solving, interpersonal skills, empathy) is essential for success in PK-12 and post-secondary educational settings and the workplace. Development of these skills increases self-efficacy, confidence, and sense of purpose. It results in more positive relationships with peers and adults and reduces emotional distress. Each of these facilitate a climate in which all students can learn and succeed. Implementing SEL in the teacher preparation classroom helps teacher candidates develop their own social and emotional competence and the ability to foster nurturing learning environments in their own classrooms.

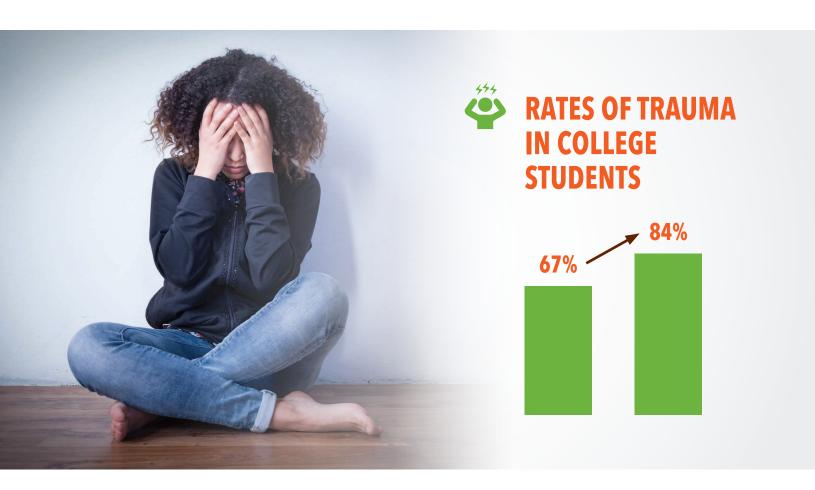
#### Practitioner

# Strategies for Applying Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)

- Seek connections between your lived experiences and behavior.
- Cultivate coping strategies to deal with stress.
- Pursue work-life balance.
- Engage in critical self-reflection.
- Apply root cause analysis for responsible decision-making.
- Celebrate success (yours and your students).
- Practice mindfulness.

#### **Trauma Informed Practices**

There has been significant research on trauma and strategies to ameliorate its impact on individuals. Trauma is defined as a stressful event or series of events experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life threatening and resulting in adverse effects on the individual's well-being8. Traumatic life experiences may include but are not limited to bullying, witnessing or experiencing community violence, life-threatening disasters, or death or loss of a loved one. Trauma may be experienced across the lifespan without regard to gender, race, ethnicity, or socio-economic status and has been found to negatively influence school performance (PK-12 and post-secondary). Just as it is likely that PK-12 educators will have children in their classrooms who have experienced and may be struggling with trauma, so too will teacher educators have candidates in their classrooms that are experiencing or have experienced trauma (e.g., prevalence rates of trauma in college students range between 67% and 84%<sup>10</sup>). Thus, it is essential for teacher educators to be trauma-informed and have a repertoire of strategies and help-seeking resources to better support individuals who have experienced trauma. Doing so means realizing the impact of trauma, recognizing its signs and symptoms, and responding through a trauma-sensitive/ trauma-informed lens.



#### **Practitioner**

#### **Strategies for Trauma Informed Practice**

The following are key principles identified as essential to a trauma-informed approach?:

- Safety
  - Foster an environment that provides for physical, social, emotional, and academic safety.
  - Be present and available.
- Trustworthiness and Transparency
  - Provide clear expectations and consistency.
  - Provide structure and predictability.
- Support and Connection
  - Furnish applicable resources to help students succeed.
- Collaboration and Mutuality
  - Co-create the learning environment.
  - Seek input and share power.
- Empower, Voice, and Choice
  - Develop self-efficacy and advocacy skills in your students.
  - Provide opportunities for choice in assignments and assessments.
- Social Justice
  - Attend to issues of power and privilege and respect diverse perspectives, experience, and identities.
- Resilience, Growth, and Change
  - Recognize students' strengths and resilience as foundational to further their academic and affective development.

## **Asset-Based Approaches**

Students who are racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse and/or come from low socio-economic backgrounds have historically been defined by what they lack or cannot do. Research overwhelmingly focuses on instability, underperformance, and violence. These deficit-based approaches result in master narratives that are harmful to students and their communities. A focus on academic achievement is short sighted and leads to a band-aid solutions approach rather than addressing the root causes of the underlying problems. Quinn¹¹ expands on the impact of a deficit-based discourse, which he notes perpetuates stereotypes, pathologizes students, and results in explanations rooted in blame of students and their families. This blame-game further traumatizes students, impairing executive

functioning and reducing cognitive bandwidth<sup>12,13</sup>. Further, deficit-based approaches provide little in the way of hope and/or specific actions that build upon the strengths students and communities possess (i.e., funds of knowledge, or the skills and knowledge that have been historically and culturally developed to enable an individual or household to function within a given culture)<sup>14</sup>.

A more proactive and humanistic approach encompasses vocabularies of hope<sup>15</sup> and the enduring qualities that give hope power leading to transformation. Such vocabularies embrace asset-based and appreciative inquiry, born in relationships and inspired by imagination of a future that is yet to be. Appreciative inquiry acknowledges the current reality and appreciates the best of what is; envisions what could be; co-constructs what should be; and determines processes for sustaining what was imagined and implemented. Similarly, asset-based approaches are strengths driven, focus on opportunity, and identify what is present that can be built upon.

#### Practitioner

## **Strategies for Asset-Based Approaches**

- Build relationships with your students that are based on mutual respect.
- Employ a learning from and with mentality, with student and teacher both serving as teacher and learner.
- Draw upon communal funds of knowledge.
- Examine and challenge existing systemic inequities.
- Involve students in recognizing and addressing deficit mindsets.
- Be cognizant of the language you use in the classroom.
- Begin your instructional design with questions rather than assertions.
- Engage students in identifying how their lived experiences can serve as a foundation for future learning.
- Maintain high expectations for all students and provide the supports and differentiation necessary for students to meet those expectations.
- Reinforce the need for mistakes and misunderstandings as part of the learning process.
  - Be transparent in how/when you might struggle or need support as an educator to authentically model that growth mindset.
- Remind students that you will challenge and support them but avoid rescuing them: productive struggle is the goal.
- Provide formative feedback identifying what students can do and how they can use these strengths to address areas of need.
- Engage students in community-based learning and asset mapping.



## **INSTRUCTION**

onceptualizations of effective instruction focus on the link between teaching and learning. Inclusive instruction focuses on this and more. Inclusive instruction is about seeing not just teaching and learning, but the learner, "her brilliance, her goodness, and her value to the world"<sup>16</sup>. The premise and components of culturally sustaining practices and the concepts of warmdemandingness and differentiated instruction bring insights into inclusive instruction.

## **Culturally Sustaining Practices**

Culturally sustaining practices intentionally and intensely center the humanity of students, which refers to what makes students who they are – their cultural and linguistic identities, knowledge, communities, present-day conditions, struggles, and concerns that inform their lived experience. This idea of centering the humanity of students is more than caring. It involves repositioning of our pedagogies to focus on minoritized students and ensuring that the outcomes of learning are not "centered on White, middle-class, monolingual, and monocultural norms of educational achievement" <sup>17</sup>. It entails valuing, cultivating, and maintaining students' cultural ways of knowing and doing. In other words,

in culturally sustaining practices the outcome of learning is additive, not subtractive. Inclusive instruction operates from these stances. When inclusive instruction is at the forefront, learning is reclaiming and sustaining, rather than eradicating and/or demanding conformity.

Another central tenet of culturally sustaining practices is the treatment of students as the subjects in their learning, as opposed to objects waiting to be filled with facts and knowledge. This means that every student is an expert in some valued knowledge and skill and that they are simultaneously in the position of a student and a partner in knowledge construction. This idea of students engaging in the dual roles of learner-teacher, expert-novice parallels the way inclusive instruction operates. The role of the educator in this is to find out students' knowledge and expertise and create conditions where they can function as intellectual leaders or resources for learning.

#### **Practitioner**

# Strategies for Culturally Sustaining Practices

- Examine your pedagogical practices and organization of teaching and learning to ensure that they do not contribute to deficient framing.
- Invite students to provide feedback on the elements of the social structures of the class, the curriculum, or the teaching practices.
- Offer opportunities for students to explore knowledge and ways of knowing and being that are traditionally excluded or positioned on the periphery of dominant structures.
- Recognize the varied and valuable life experiences and existing knowledge students bring into the course and invite them to contribute what they know best.
- Create contexts where students see themselves and each other as capable and competent and learn from one another.

## **Warm-Demandingness**

Centering the humanity of students necessitates the responsibility to hold high, yet attainable, expectations for learners. Warm-demandingness is a concept that embodies this responsibility and a stance that inclusive instruction embraces. Often associated with the teaching of minoritized students, warm-demandingness involves exhibiting a genuine belief in learners' capabilities. This means setting high expectations, being clear and explicit about those expectations, and providing the necessary supports for their achievement.

#### **Practitioner**

#### **Strategies for Warm-Demandingness**

- Be willing to meet students where they are yet establish high expectations and provide support so students meet those expectations.
- Remind students regularly that you while you will challenge and support them, you will avoid rescuing them.
- Assure students that they have the potential to reach high expectations.

#### **Differentiated Instruction**

All students can reach high expectations, but some may need targeted assistance to do so. The responsibility that educators assume to provide students with supports appropriate to their needs is differentiated instruction. Giving students differentiated opportunities to succeed is about educational equity, and so differentiated instruction is a form of inclusive teaching.

At its core, differentiated instruction is about providing students with multiple options for what they learn, how they learn, and how they demonstrate what they have learned. Another construct complementary to differentiated instruction is Universal Design for Learning (UDL) which is about designing instruction, spaces, and tools such that they remove barriers to students' learning. While differentiated instruction centers student variability in teaching and learning, UDL centers student variability in curriculum and materials development.

Recently, Waitoller and Thorius<sup>18</sup> identified ways to bring together educators' thinking and understanding of UDL with the ideas of culturally sustaining practices. Their argument is that UDL has predominantly focused on ableism and that such a singular focus renders other identity markers (e.g., race, gender, language) as invisible when accounting for learner variability. Thus, they suggest that educators attend to relations and intersections between and among ableism and other identity markers to advance inclusive instruction.

#### **Practitioner**

#### **Strategies for Differentiated Instruction**

- Provide multiple options for content (what students learn), process (how they learn it) and product (how they demonstrate what they have learned).
- Use assessment data to differentiate instruction according to student needs.
- Present information in multiple formats.
- Make equitable use of instructional technology to enhance access.
- Be cognizant and reflective of how your design choices position students.



It is essential for teacher educators to be assessment literate and ensure that their teacher candidates are also. Assessment literacy is the ability to create and use a variety of assessments to progress student learning. It requires critical reflection on why assess, what to assess and for whom, how to assess it, and acting on the results. The Assessment Reform Group (ARG) found that increasing teachers' assessment literacy could positively impact student learning by as much as one year of instruction<sup>19</sup>. Yet, research also suggests that teachers are not well prepared in assessment practices. Inclusive instruction goes hand-in-hand with assessment for it is through well-developed, equitable assessments that we gain important information on how to revise or enhance instruments to ensure positive academic outcomes for all students. Below are considerations for making assessments equitable.

## **Transparency in Assessment**

Transparency in assessment means that students will have a deep understanding of how and by which criteria they will be assessed. Transparency requires assignments that are unambiguous and provide students a clear path to success. This is made possible by providing students with a rationale for (the why) and relevancy of the assignment as well as the process they may engage in for completing the assignment and corresponding rubric.

It is important to point out that there are critiques associated with transparency in assessment. Bearman and Ajjawi<sup>20</sup> encourage educators to think more deeply about transparency and how it is used by highlighting two transparency myths:

# 1 THAT IT IS ACHIEVABLE

2 THAT IT IS NEUTRAL

They note that it is impossible to make everything visible as some knowledge cannot be expressed and criteria are interpreted based on a variety of factors, including students' body of knowledge on the content being assessed. Regarding neutrality, they posit the question "which agendas do the written criteria serve?". These are important considerations to ensure assessments are equitable and assess what was intended.

#### **Practitioner**

## Strategies for Transparency in Assessment

- Reflect on the following questions posed by Bearman and Ajjawi when developing assessment criteria:
  - Which agendas do the written criteria serve?
  - What might be learned from these criteria about the nature of knowledge?
- Write criteria such that they serve as indicators of quality.
- Co-construct assessment criteria and ensure a shared understanding of same.
- Align your learning objectives, assessments, and instructional strategies.

#### **Differentiated Assessment**

As already noted, classrooms are complex systems comprised of diverse learners who bring an array of strengths, talents, and needs. As much as may be desired, students do not enter the classroom with the same background knowledge. They do not all learn in the same way on the same day. They have varied life experiences, preferences, backgrounds, and abilities. Thus, much like instruction, assessments should be differentiated to meet students where they are as they strive to meet the same high expectations. Assessments should also be designed in ways that allow all students to demonstrate what they have learned.

Differentiated assessments are a form of formative assessments that can be accomplished by providing students options, but care must be taken to ensure that the option provided assesses what is expected at the appropriate level of rigor.

#### Practitioner

#### **Strategies for Differentiated Assessment**

- Choice is central to differentiated assessment.
- In planning for differentiated assessments:
  - Conduct a pre-assessment to gather information as to what students currently know.
  - Design instruction and corresponding differentiated formative assessments to further student progress.
  - Design a summative assessment to assess mastery.
- Provide frequent feedback.

#### **Student-Centered Assessment**

Teacher-centered classrooms are those where the teacher serves as the 'sage on the stage,' assuming total responsibility for presenting information to students who passively internalize the information being provided. Freire<sup>21</sup> referred to this type of instruction as the banking concept of education. The teacher deposits information, which students receive and regurgitate. Conversely, a student-centered classroom emphasizes the role of the student as an active participant in the learning process. It utilizes instructional strategies that are open ended, have no one right answer, and may be solved using different techniques. A student-centered classroom requires student-centered assessments. These assessments are individualized, focus on learning and growth, motivate and engage students in regulating their own learning, and are informative and useful to a variety of audiences. Student-centered assessments engage the students in setting learning goals and monitoring their progress such that all students can tell their learning stories. Student-centered assessments are connected to students' lived experiences and have some value, purpose, and use for students.

#### **Practitioner**

#### **Strategies for Learner-Centered Assessments**

- Assess students' passions and interests.
- Assess both content and soft skills.
- Co-create assessments with students.
- Engage students in self-assessments.
- Provide frequent feedback.
- Engage students in peer assessments.
  - Provide instruction by modeling how to assess and provide quality feedback.
- Choose assessment methods that are interesting and challenging.

#### **Reducing Bias in Assessments**

The past year has highlighted systemic and institutionalized inequities within and beyond the realm of education. The pandemic has played out within a backdrop of racism that laid bare the experiences of historically marginalized individuals and emphasized the need for attending to structural and systemic racism and biases that occur on a day-to-day basis. This includes analyzing curriculum and assessments to ensure they are free from bias, accurately represent diverse individuals, include contributions of diverse individuals, and provide multiple perspectives. This is especially relevant in assessment as assessment in education has historically served as a sorting mechanism, disproportionately relegating students of color into special education, tracking students, and designating schools as 'Failing' based on student performance. High-stakes decisions based on assessment results demand the use of assessments that are free of bias to the extent possible as well as the use of multiple measures to triangulate data to ensure validity of data.

Popham<sup>22</sup> defines assessment bias as "...qualities of an assessment instrument that unfairly penalize a group of students because of students' gender, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, religion, or other such group defining characteristics." Given the role of assessment in further marginalizing minoritized students and limiting opportunities, it is essential for teacher educators to model ways in which bias in assessments can be minimized. This requires engaging in critical self-reflection to identify personal biases (implicit and explicit) that we have internalized and lead to differential treatment of our students. Further, teacher educators must review their assessments from their students' perspectives. Finally, teacher educators must disaggregate student performance data by sub-groups as this may provide important information pertaining to course content and assessments and the ways in which both disenfranchise and negatively impact student progression.

#### **Practitioner**

#### **Strategies for Reducing Assessment Bias**

- Analyze test items and eliminate those that stereotype particular groups and/or lead to underprediction of student performance by sub-groups.
- Disaggregate student performance data by sub-groups to determine disparate performance.
- Review assessments from your students' perspectives.
- Attend to the physical space (face-to-face versus virtual) in which assessments are administered.
- Examine your unconscious biases.
- Anonymize the work you are assessing.
- Consider that we are not actually measuring learning, we are measuring a proxy for learning.
- Be aware that the method used to complete the assessment can result in bias (e.g., online assessment vs. paper and pencil assessments).
- Be cognizant of confirmation bias (e.g., focusing on evidence that confirms your existing beliefs or theories).

# Closing

In this primer, we have provided an overview of BranchED's conceptualization of inclusive instruction along with strategies to assist teacher educators in implementing it. The ideas presented here benefit from deeper study, and we encourage you to explore each further to gain a more substantive understanding of how to ensure all students are afforded an equitable education in a welcoming climate where they can thrive and succeed.

In closing, we emphasize that inclusive instruction is a stance to embrace, a mindset to embody with our hearts and in our practice. It is not something to think about once and be done. That said, at its core, inclusive instruction is a way for using equity and sense of belonging as a lens through which to view the students and everything that goes on within the classroom. It is about meeting students where they are, recognizing the strengths, gifts, and talents all students possess and using those as a foundation for future learning, fostering a classroom climate that values and validates all, and designing instruction and assessments that represent multiple perspectives. It requires teachers, whether in PK-12 or postsecondary settings, to engage in a personal journey of self-awareness and development and recognize the fact that this work is never-ending.

## **Endnotes**

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