

# Centering Educational Equity in a Primary Leadership Role

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## ABSTRACT

Before the EdD program through UC Davis, my own decisions and thinking process perpetuated an inequitable system that seemed to be working to support and uplift marginalized communities. When beginning my personal journey through the doctoral program and throughout the pandemic, there were epiphanies that awakened me to new institutional versions that empowered my ways of approaching education and leading future generations to question, early and often, the systems that were supposed to increase their ability to become leaders themselves. The concluding research recommendations support the implementation of culturally sustaining pedagogical practices to increase authentic historically marginalized student self-expression and empowerment of students and community. This work is done through understanding the priorities of the community, offering transparency, communicating, and listening while promoting health and safety as a means of *cariño*. Communicating that our priorities on site are children first, rather than test scores and attendance percentages, I seek creative means to empower our young scholars to bridge a gap between site and community and authentically celebrate the diversity on our campus.

## KEYWORDS

*Cariño, culturally sustaining pedagogy, historically marginalized community, diversity, primary education, educational leadership, scholar practitioner*

The educational system is already set up to be inequitable, meant for historically marginalized students to continue to jump through hoops as their counterparts maneuver a system that is meant to help them succeed. Creating a more equitable educational system would require courageous conversations about focusing on the foundational issues that need changing to ensure long-lasting academic results for all students. As a leader in the educational system, we contribute to the inequitable educational system, whether intentional or not, as we stripped pieces of our identity to conform to acceptable academic expectations that resulted in our role within academics. Not until we are in this role that we find that the components that we left outside of the academic setting, can be the strongest contributors to effective, long-lasting, equitable change.

Educators looking to contribute to a more equitable system, as historically marginalized students themselves, are met with unwavering demands within the field. These demands include but are not limited to developing student's social-emotional health, balancing, and managing large caseloads of students, catering to individual learning styles, communicating home to families, and teaching to standards that often do not reflect their lived experiences or cultural background. Educators and site leaders are often challenged to balance the desire to authentically educate and support the whole child while taking on an educational system that values test scores and attendance rates. This challenge has been a part of my educational career since it began in 2005. Throughout my many roles in education in grades TK-12, many trends changed, yet there was one constant: decisions must be made about allotting time for what is most important in the educational world, and uplifting

authentic culturally sustaining campus culture didn't seem to make the priority list.

Throughout my educational journey I have been a visual arts educator between grades TK-12, an assistant principal at a secondary site and most recently an elementary school principal. Although the role and responsibilities have changed throughout the years, there was a constant amongst all my roles and sites: I worked with a highly diverse student population both culturally and social-economically. I concentrated my curriculum on the topic of assisting students develop their personal definitions of identity both through artistic expression and through literature. My own scholastic goal as an educator remained the same: uplifting historically marginalized voice and empowering students. Throughout my most recent role as a site principal, which occurred a year after obtaining my EdD, I was more empowered than ever to lead a site that offered a Dual Language Immersion program and uplift student voices as a foundation to the decisions that would be made on our school site and with the community. Through the CANDEL program, I was empowered numerous times by both the professors and content shared to solidify the belief that a more culturally sustaining academic setting was possible in an educational system that did not make equity a priority.

The role of primary educators is not only crucial in its foundation, but also weighs heavy in understanding that without starting a student's education career in support and care, it may result in long term effects that they may never recover from. Although an educator can continually evolve as a teacher, there is no reset button for



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students. The academic years for students go by quickly and “mastery” of content is often fleeting as teachers are met with the expectation at the primary level to teach multiple subjects, introduce state testing, and keep oversized classes meeting grade level standards or above.

At a primary site with a Dual Language Immersion (DLI) program, understanding and setting standards for dual language at an early age in a system that is only meant to measure English proficiency through state testing is faced with endless obstacles. Through a DLI program students and their families are sold an idea that they can meet grade level standards in addition to the mastery of two languages all before leaving the 6<sup>th</sup> grade. As the educational leader (principal) of a DLI elementary program, our goal as a site is to uplift the cultural knowledge of our students, while also preparing them for the secondary schooling that is awaiting them when promoting from our site. Upon taking this role, soon after the CANDEL doctoral program at UC Davis, the roles and responsibilities continued to be a fine balance among state standards, communication home and uplifting historically marginalized voices to preparing a teaching staff to understand the weight they carry in preparing young minds to be academically successful.

This current role consists of understanding a new community that is widely diverse both in socio-economic status, race, parental educational levels, and home languages. I now can apply theory into action by collaborating with site and community to build a bridge that authentically reflects the diversity that encompasses the TK-6<sup>th</sup> grade school site of 485 students. The center of all decisions while leading a campus continues to be in equitable practices.

Real equity work attempts to repair, undo, heal, and atone for generations of violence, trauma, and racial, educational, and economic inequities while recognizing Black people as a mighty people with a beautiful history of resistance, refusal, strength, and creativity who also deserve ease and grace. (Love, 2023, p. 216)

After the CANDEL program, the difference in my approaches now lies in the confidence of questioning approaches that continue to perpetuate an inequitable educational cycle that does not reflect the lived experiences of the students and community it is meant to serve. Although the journey will be complex, and is by no means a quick fix, decisions are made with intention.

Through the professional development opportunities given to site leaders on a four-hour basis per month, I work to find educational trends that are occurring on my site and lead the choices that are being made on an individual basis. Through classroom observations, PLC (professional learning committee) meetings, and professional development, work is done to align the decision-making process of backwards mapping intentional community events, increasing parental involvement, developing a sense of campus belonging, and implementing routines and procedures campus wide that align with an equitable lens.

This work is done through understanding the priorities of the community, offering transparency, communicating, and listening while promoting health and safety as a means of *cariño*. “[A]uthentic *cariño* [is] a potent combination of familial, intellectual, and critical care—that pervade[s] educators’ interactions with youth and contribute[s] to a culture of engaged learning” (Curry, 2021, p. 1). *Cariño* is rooted in genuine love for other people’s children, the

students that fill classroom seats, occupy school halls, and come with a variety of experiences that enhance a campus culture.

Communicating that our priorities on site are children first, rather than test scores and attendance percentages, I seek creative means to empower our young scholars, bridge a gap between site and community and authentically celebrate the diversity on our campus.

The measurement of an equitable education would require significantly greater attention to qualitative assessments of schools and classrooms to determine the specific needs of the community and how those are being met, or not. As it stands, we have an almost exclusive commitment to quantitative ‘equal’ assessments through state and national testing and measurement of the allocation of human and monetary resources. (Duncan-Andrade, 2007, p. 618)

Though this role as an educational leader is a multifaceted position, we must genuinely welcome our students where they are and seek to lift them higher to obtain equitable educational experiences. This process begins with genuinely caring for the community we serve and the students who fill our seats daily. Through the research of my dissertation through CANDEL project, one of my mentors introduced the concept of Authentic Caring/*Cariño* to my work. Through this lens, I was able to link my approaches to education to theoretical approaches that spoke to academia.

## AUTHENTIC CARING

For those educators who have made and continue to make an impact in the lives of historically marginalized student populations, a commonality among the traits that persist is *cariño*. Like Culturally Sustaining Pedagogical practices, *cariño* theory is rooted in a network of care and justice, a variety of support systems that encouraged student to challenge the inequitable social norms through a commitment of support by educators on campus.

Fueled by a desire to interrupt inequity and promote social justice, schools infused with critical *cariño* challenge students to examine how race, ethnicity, social class, and gender shape history and day-to-day living. Additionally, they involve explicit attention to cultures of power with an aim toward helping students master dominant discourses while still valuing and sustaining their home cultures. (Curry, 2021, p. 14)

Authentic *cariño* can hold many places on a school campus and is truly implemented when all three forms of *cariño* are present: familial, intellectual, and critical, thus taking into account the whole student and weaving together a variety of tools to support them in all aspects of their life. It involves:

invit[ing] educators to push the narrative of what we teach by drawing on the FoK (Funds of Knowledge) that students bring from home-traditions, family histories, parental occupational knowledge, home language, skills, and popular culture-to challenge racism by retelling their stories and drawing on the cultural wealth of our communities. (Yosso, 2005 as cited in Garcia, 2012, p. 41)

Within a primary school campus, there are a variety of opportunities to build these supportive relationships that not only link to academic engagement but promote positive, caring and authentic relationships rooted in a genuine desire to work alongside students to sustain their



cultural wealth and develop critical consciousness to disrupt the dominant culture of white middle-class centered educational norms.

Building positive relationships with students that extend beyond the classroom, with real world experiences within the community help students understand authentic caring, “cariño”. These practices increase students’ success, especially among historically marginalized students who struggle to maintain their personal identities within an oppressive educational system. “For teachers aspiring to enact authentic care, political clarity entails recognizing oppressive structures and ideologies and grappling with how macroeconomic and sociopolitical realities impact day-to-day life, especially the school experience of subordinated groups” (Curry, 2021, p. 9). This goal of creating a sense of belonging within the educational world and on a primary school campus is rooted in building relationships. This is key in increasing student engagement and overall academic success through culturally sustaining decisions in both academics, extra-curriculars and professional training. Reiterating the importance that if educators do not get to know their students primarily, the effectiveness of any type of education will more likely be lacking.

As an educational leader, I work to have the idea of “cariño” as the foundation of all decisions within our campus. How will our educational decisions of today, whether it be the literature, state standard or supplemental curriculum affect our students, and will it support the idea that we truly care about them beyond just academics. “Schools have also been accused of being insensitive to students’ cultural backgrounds and thus of failing to serve some student populations because curricula are designed for middle class White children” (Howe & Lisi, 2014, as cited in Knight, 2015, p 71). Authentic cariño consistently implemented, takes care of the whole child, working to balance academic expectations, rigor and high achievements while taking into consideration the mind, body and spirit of their personal/mental well-being.

Cariño acknowledges that students, like their educators, balance more in their personal lives than what occurs within the classroom setting, and with this sense of balance, is a core value to increasing individual student empowerment, supporting their freedom to express, and creating realistic experiences for students where a world may not be so supportive. This work is done intentionally, as a core value for our site. “I could not serve the children and the system. The system was not about helping children; it was about helping the system, by default, you are helping to maintain the system” (Love, 2023, p. 46). We cannot educate those we do not care for, and we cannot be in a role that affects a person’s life trajectory if they are not consistently uplifted, valued, and understood authentically.

## PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Through the CANDEL program and my research on culturally sustaining pedagogical practices, my new approach to leadership sought to affect a site’s underlying norms, beliefs, mission, vision and principles, the way in which an entire campus could be structured. To begin the process, I designed professional development that works alongside the community we serve by communicating often, inviting them to make decisions with us and finding programs that reflect the DLI program we offer to our students. This process also requires teachers to share their findings about their students’ academics, maintain an open-door policy to see each other’s approach to education and be willing to give and

receive feedback. “The role of education and schooling is to equip students with tools not only to learn how to participate in this society, but also to challenge the oppressive structures that limit their lives” (Oakes & Lipton, 2007, p.30). Our responsibility as educators is to create an equitable experience for all students to engage in a broader perspective of an advanced environment, that has yet to be created. This would include a blend of cultural values, environmental values and equitable exposure to educational direction and guidance.

This process has educators shifting their data conversations away from test results and practicing the use of equitable educational practices, having conversations around race/gender, community environments, and cultures on campus and identifying equitable educational outcomes as a new instructional indicator where they “assume responsibility for the elimination of unequal results” (Bensimon, 2005, p. 105). Although uncomfortable at first, the results from these implementations, Bensimon (2005) argued, would intensify learning, motivate further inquiry, and spearhead change; all resulting in a more equity minded staff. This approach does not come without its barriers, or levels of discomfort. Yet, it is through this discomfort and calling out our contributions to a perpetual inequitable educational system that results in long-term effective change. Leading an elementary school site, staff is asked to collaborate in grade level teams and focus on unequal academic outcomes of students, consistently analyzing and collecting data, focused on grade level assessments and benchmarks which are directly linked to the choices they are making in an academic setting daily. Adding a reflection component when going through the curriculum cycle on what they are teaching and who it represents, leads to understanding how care/cariño and cultural sustaining choices have a greater academic impact on students that are long lasting.

## ALIGNMENT WITH EQUITY

My role as a leader, prior to this CANDEL course, depicted the roles and responsibilities that were assigned to someone to complete and check off a list mandated by those in a position to delegate work. Priding myself in completing tasks, and moving on, I often gave little thought to the skills, experiences and best practices associated with the tasks that I was assigned to complete. Rarely voicing my concerns of purpose; if I could be better utilized in a different area to effectively shift educational practices, I felt that completing these tasks was a display of a “successful” leader. At my core, and as part of my identity, is a caring, dedicated, passionate educator who works to create an all-inclusive, meaningful academic environment for all students and staff. I value the importance of maintaining transparency with educational partners, honesty through vulnerability and a willingness to reflect on my personal decision-making process to sustain those values.

Therefore, many of the decisions I make in my leadership role are due to my personal upbringing, experiences, and identity, which I would define as not only a Latina woman, but a mother, and now as a scholar practitioner. The first identity piece was a role I was born into, the second a choice, and the third a lifelong journey. All positions are of great importance, and each have a significant impact on my daily decisions, the way I view my world, and the role I play in others’ lives.

Workers of color, especially women of color, are the backbone of equity work and anti-racism in education. Their work is laid



against a backdrop of anti-racism and DEI on an institutional, individual, and societal level that is too often made painstakingly ornamental. (Love, 2023, p. 216)

There is a strong internal desire to help others find these roles within themselves and empower them to lead the change in a structurally discriminating system. Standing back and allowing others to define my role as a leader, is no longer an option.

Equitable education is at the core of my career as a leader, and although I have experienced marginalization in my position, I no longer sit silently and allow it to define who I am. As a leader and scholar practitioner, I have often been silenced when voicing my opinions, offering solutions for equitable experiences for students or suggestions for professional development for a school site. Empowered through the doctoral program of CANDEL, I understand the work that needs to be present to help others feel valued, represented and seen in a position of employee, student, and/or community member.

Working on a school site that is predominantly Latinx, within one of the most diverse districts in the nation, there are times where my personal experiences and ties to culture and community can benefit the direction of our professional development and data analysis to better serve our students. There is also awareness that this implementation of diversification is not limited to our lived experiences as identifying Latinx culture, and that we continued our role within education because the inequitable educational system worked for us to lead in the educational world. The difference is as educational leaders, we need to continue to reach out and hear from our community on their needs and experiences to not perpetuate the need to leave pieces of our lived experiences behind to become a successful educational leader. The cycle of reflection, evolution, care and understanding is a path that must continually be explored.

Although tackling marginalization can be an area for perseverance, I am often empowered through the growth of my diverse staff. I consistently advocate for my staff, acknowledge the work of my administrative peers, and note the academic success of our student body. I have been empowered through the CANDEL program to no longer allow myself to be silenced and have engaged in numerous conversations, although uncomfortable, to advocate for a voice in the decision-making process, leading professional development around equitable education and increasing diversity awareness on our campus and within the district. I feel that through this empowerment I am more respected by my students, staff, and community.

As an educational leader, I support our school site collaboratively, responding ethically and responsibly to a variety of points of view and leading our staff to one common goal which will align to our site values of celebrating diversity. To ensure effective practice I prioritize self-reflection, peer input, and utilizing multiple points of view to determine best practices for students. "Education should be a space where children, our greatest gift, learn to love, understand difference, communicate inside of disagreement and conflict, find joy in learning, and have the time and resources to be guided by their imagination" (Love, 2023, p. 269). Throughout this process, I also ensure that we do not ask others to give up their personal beliefs, identities or roles and only empower their strengths by helping them to inquire more information on how to sustain a progressive academic culture. It is without question that they will be

cared for, seen and validated through the educational journey we are on together.

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