

# Educating Toward a Multiracial Democracy in California

March 2023

Erica Hodgin, University of California, Riverside

Educating toward a multiracial democracy means centering instruction and resources on the needs, experiences, and identities of each and every young person; addressing issues of racial and social justice; encouraging respectful, equitable, and informed participation; and supporting engagement and problem-solving within and across diverse communities. Schools and other youth-serving institutions that promote education for a multiracial democracy are places where young people build supportive communities, figure out who they are in relation to peers from diverse backgrounds, and collectively contribute to a better society for all.

The Educating Toward a Multiracial Democracy framework is a set of best practices designed to make these goals a reality. The framework comprises three overlapping priorities: building caring and restorative relationships, integrating lived civics into school curricula, and fostering youth voice.

In the summer of 2022 we asked a group of eight teachers how implementation of the framework might affect instruction in their schools. The teachers were from various regions of California, and they were diverse in terms of race/ethnicity and educational role.

FOR A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE FULL REPORT, visit [Educating Toward a Multiracial Democracy: Summary.](#)

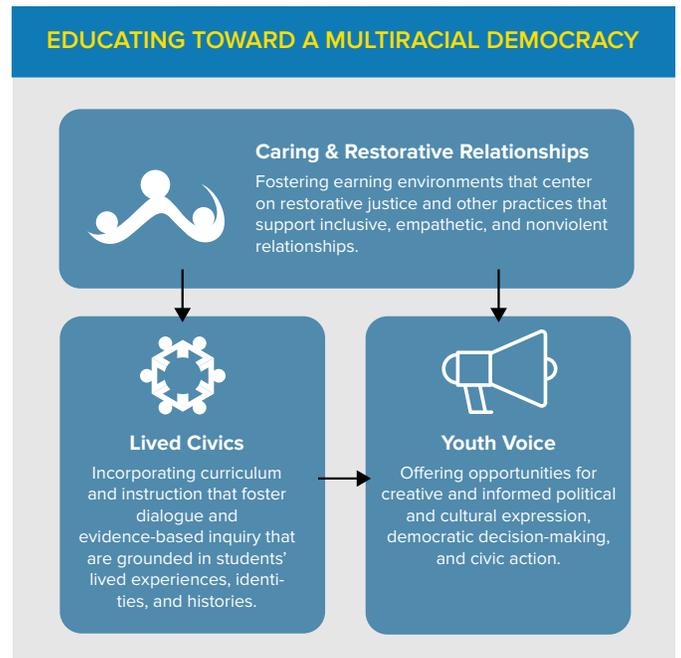
## What Role Can Teachers Play?

One high school ELA teacher said that the framework felt “like a long time coming.” He also emphasized how California should be “on the cutting edge to begin with, because we have such a diverse and rich capacity in people, for every square foot.” One primary teacher described the framework as promoting “awareness, an open mind, and a desire to understand.” An elementary counselor found that it mirrored her “everyday practice,” which she described as a “delicate balance of doing my job and having sensitivity to student needs.”

When asked to describe what impact the framework might have, teachers described libraries with books that mirror the students’ lives; a curriculum that is culturally responsive and sustaining; staff and leadership that reflect the student body; civic learning; grading for equity; and “education as the mode for societal change.”

## Caring and Restorative Relationships

Building caring and restorative relationships with students is a teacher's foundation for student learning and growth. One teacher described his school culture as "family oriented," something he and his colleagues had worked to develop over time. He also recounted that he has built authentic relationships with students in his classroom, which led students to tell an administrator that his class "is a safe harbor for us. We feel comfortable. We feel at home." The administrators at his school have provided him with the flexibility to be responsive to student needs. As long as parents are his allies and he keeps them up-to-date about what he is doing in the classroom, he feels that he can be successful with his students. Teachers highlighted a variety of programs and activities that help build caring and restorative relationships, including conflict mediation, peer mediation, restorative justice, family and community events, clubs and athletics that are focused on drawing in all students, and "looping," or moving groups of students from one grade to the next with the same teacher to deepen relationships over multiple years.



## Lived Civics

Teachers agreed that there is still a lot more work to be done to integrate students' lived experiences and identities into the K-12 curriculum, although there has been progress in this area in recent years. Often textbooks and curricula are outdated, and it is the teachers who provide supplemental materials that address students' lived experiences. While this type of flexibility allows teachers to be responsive to their students and community, more support and high-quality resources are badly needed. Some teachers we spoke with were in districts that were beginning to implement an ethnic studies curriculum, and they were able to seamlessly integrate material on students' lived experiences into instruction. Teachers in districts that have not yet implemented ethnic studies reported that they had to use materials from advisory programs or non-tested subjects like health to add lived civics to their lessons. One school counselor shared that because she did not have to adhere to state standards for teaching and testing, she was able to take advantage of the "teachable moments" that arise in students' lives and address them in ways that "grow them through" these experiences.

## Youth Voice

Teachers identified opportunities for students to exercise their voice as essential to educating for a multiracial democracy. Two examples were highlighted: serving as a school board student representative, and going to school board meetings to advocate for programs or ideas. Other examples included participating in clubs and after school activities, student council, and restorative justice programs that encourage students to talk about their concerns with one another. Youth voice can also be integrated into the curriculum and instruction.

One challenge with supporting youth voice is ensuring that teachers' involvement is sustained and holistic. One teacher talked about how youth voice "needs to develop

more” because support tends to be piecemeal and “depends on teacher interest,” which is subject to “staffing fluctuations.”

## What Are Some Challenges for Teachers?

---

Teachers noted that one critical barrier to integrating the framework’s best practices was the lack of training and professional development that is ongoing, rather than “one and done.” Like everyone, teachers come to their work with understandings and perspectives drawn from their own lives. They need time and opportunities to learn about the histories, lived experiences, and viewpoints of other communities. They also need pedagogic tools and ideas for how to lead lessons that will affirm the cultural wealth of various communities, highlight cross-cultural learning and alliance, and encourage honest reflection about social injustice.

It is important to acknowledge that upheavals within the profession have made the challenging work of teaching even more difficult in the last few years. Staff instability and turnover undermines the development of a stable core group that can move this work forward. One teacher we spoke with said that she and her colleagues were often “too overwhelmed to explore these deeper issues” of educating toward a multiracial democracy. These challenges are exacerbated when teachers of color experience differential treatment. Teachers need fair treatment and better working conditions—including scheduled time for reflection and planning—to engage deeply in the essential work of educating for a multiracial democracy.

Finally, the introduction of our framework comes at a challenging time for California teachers. Some parents and community members are uncertain about or even hostile toward educational programs that lift up the value of diversity. These antidemocratic voices have been amplified of late, creating new challenges for democracy and public education. In order to truly advance education toward a multiracial democracy, it will be important to introduce these ideas to a broad cross-section of parents in a way that resonates with their beliefs. Almost all parents want their children’s schools to provide a caring and supportive environment in which young people’s identities are affirmed and in which all young people experience a sense of belonging. It is important for public schools to encourage parents to share these democratic commitments with their children and with others in their communities.

## What Are the Future Possibilities and Paths Forward?

---

Teachers noted that the priorities identified in the framework were being addressed only partially in their local areas and that funding and consistency will be key to moving forward. Sustained commitment and investment in this work over time, as well as finding ways to scale implementation across a district, will ensure that adoption of the framework isn’t limited to particular programs or certain classrooms.

It is also essential for educational systems to empower educators and provide them with opportunities for reflection and decision-making. “This is not easy stuff that we’re talking about,” one teacher observed. Calling for “professionally empowered educators,” who can “radically make changes to the curriculum” in a manner that reflects depth over cursory studies, she suggested that teachers have a significant opportunity to promote multiracial democracy in their classrooms.

Teachers working alongside students to move this agenda forward is a powerful strategy. Clearly it will take a collective effort to advance this agenda in a meaningful and sustainable way.

## Questions to Consider

---

1. What important steps can teachers take to advance the goals of a multiracial democracy?
2. How can teachers work in coalition with others (such as school leaders, district leaders, youth organizers, families, community members, etc.) to advance this agenda?
3. How can educators learn from youth organizing groups about ways to educate toward a multiracial democracy? For more ideas, you can explore a related brief, [How Youth Organizing Groups Educate Toward a Multiracial Democracy in California](#).
4. What are the unique challenges and barriers that educators face in trying to advance this agenda?
5. What support do educators need to do this work more powerfully?
6. What are the implications of educating toward a multiracial democracy for the recruitment and development of other educators?

FOR THE FULL REPORT, visit [Educating Toward a Multiracial Democracy in California, including references](#).

For an online version of this Brief for Teachers click [HERE](#)

