

Commentary

Deliberately Digging Deep in DEI Discourse: The 4D Exercise

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Introduction

It has become increasingly difficult to engage in meaningful discourse surrounding Diversity Equity and Inclusion (DEI) in the current political and educational landscape. On February 14, 2025, the U.S. Department of Education released the “Dear Colleague Letter” in response to the *Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard* (2023) ruling declaring that all preschool, elementary, secondary, and postsecondary educational institutions who engage in any DEI efforts will face potential loss of federal funding (U.S. Department of Education, 2025). This action from the U.S. Department of Education directly follows President Trump’s Executive Orders 14151 and 14190 which specifically focus on the dismantling and elimination of DEI programs across federal agencies and educational institutions (Executive Order No. 14151, 2025; Executive Order No. 14190, 2025). In response to the federal directives concerning DEI efforts at educational institutions, many schools are faced with critical decisions on whether to continue providing programming centered on DEI or lose federal funding. The University of Houston has lost 25 awards tied to DEI and green energy costing the institution \$4 million in funding (Scherer, 2025).

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Conversely, The University of Michigan, whose DEI efforts have served as an exemplar for many institutions of higher education, has also shut down both their Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion and Office for Health Equity and Inclusion resulting from President Trump's executive orders and the U.S. Department of Education's "Dear Colleague Letter" (Bianco, 2025). These unprecedented federal actions concerning DEI and institutional responses signal a pivotal shift in the national educational landscape. Educators and institutions alike are now faced with the ethical dilemma to reassess how—and whether—they should continue to pursue equity-focused practices under intensifying political scrutiny.

With the current political climate surrounding DEI efforts in education, many educators who believe in the importance of DEI education as a purposeful application of anti-racism, might feel a sense of inadequacy to effectively engage in matters of anti-racist practices and pedagogies within their respective classrooms. The sociopolitical environment in America demands that educators continue to incorporate and implement anti-racist practices, yet research continues to reveal that many educators lack the necessary training to effectively develop a suitable pedagogy to address issues of diversity, oppression, and racism (Blakeney, 2005; Kishimoto, 2018; St Clair & Kishimoto, 2010). Consequently, instructors risk perpetuating harmful stereotypes and silencing crucial discussions, underscoring the critical need in further developing their skills to curate spaces for meaningful dialogue to not only occur, but thrive (McBride, 2024; Werman et al., 2019). Considering the recent events within the American educational landscape, moving beyond non-racism to active anti-racism requires a dedicated pedagogical preparation that fosters self-reflection, understanding of systemic inequities, and the ability to create authentic and transformative learning spaces (Madkins & Nazar, 2022).

For teacher educators across the nation having the necessary tools to prepare pre-service educators to teach a diverse student demographic can be a daunting task. The pressures to appropriately and adequately adopt instructional practices which highlight culturally proficient approaches to a diverse learner population is a vital component towards becoming an impactful teacher (Hammond, 2015; Hollie, 2019; Howard, 2003; Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2014; Paris, 2012). Helping teachers move from compliance-based tolerance of diversity towards true transformation for equity is essential for cultivating culturally proficient practitioners (Lindsey, Nuri, Robins, Terrell, & Lindsey, 2019). According to research conducted by the Race in Education Analytics Research Lab, many educators across California

strongly believe in identifying themselves as an anti-racist educator (Jones, et al., 2021). Along with this belief, they also have concluded that engaging in anti-racist pedagogies and instructional practices is essential to crafting a moral and ethical teacher educator workforce (Jones, et al., 2021). However, when it comes to feeling prepared to appropriately utilize anti-racist practices and pedagogies within a given learning environment, they expressed feeling ill-equipped to do so. Moreover, this issue is not endemic to California, it is a national issue that must be thoughtfully and appropriately addressed with care. A poll conducted by the Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research suggests that many Americans, while divided on the concept of DEI, specifically surrounding its meaning, are not as divided on certain aspects of DEI initiatives like college courses that teach about racism and services targeted to support underrepresented students (AP-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research, 2025).

It goes without saying, that in order to develop a truly anti-racist pedagogy, one must continue to undergo a moral and ethical self-evaluation of how systemic racism, privilege, and one's own identity both perpetuate and interact in relation to these systems (Sales, 2023; Utt & Tochluk, 2020). However, without proper training and instructional coaching, educators are in danger of either inadequately facilitating classroom discussions on DEI issues or completely foregoing instruction on these topics altogether (Werman et al. 2019). The pressure to align explicit beliefs regarding DEI and anti-racist practices with explicit instructional practices within the classroom can become increasingly difficult for educators to enact in practical ways (Ohito & LaGarry, 2023; Reinke, et al., 2021). To combat this conundrum, it is the purpose of this commentary to provide a practical instructional tool to assist educators in curating a cache of instructional materials that can assist them in aligning their pedagogical beliefs with their instructional actions.

4D Exercise

Within my Social Action and Justice course, I frequently utilize a thinking practice I developed called the *4D Learning Exercise* (See Figure 1). Within this practice, students are tasked with taking a new or unfamiliar term, phrase, or ideology within our social justice for education curriculum and intellectually engage it in four ways. The learning activity is concerned with developing empathy, critical thinking, and analysis skills. Students are tasked with interrogating various terminologies specific to social justice, diversity, equity, and/or inclusion. Borrowing from the Frayer Model, which was designed

Figure 1
The 4D Exercise

Define	Deconstruct
Develop	Decide

to support vocabulary development through structured categorization, this thinking map consists of four quadrants where a term is placed atop the organizer and students are tasked to define the term, deconstruct the term, develop the term, and ultimately decide on what to do with the term as a result of their learning (Fruyer, Frederick, & Klausmeier, 1969). Furthermore, Paulo Freire’s conceptualization of critical pedagogy, dialogue, and conscientization were utilized to develop this learning activity. Throughout this commentary, I propose the reader engage in the *4D Learning Exercise* to critically examine a term that is essential to matters of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion.

Interrogating the Importance of Defining, Deconstructing, and Developing Terms in DEI for Anti-Racist Pedagogical Practices

In the first quadrant, *define*, the learner is tasked with defining a term utilizing their own words and descriptions. This helps the learner come to a greater understanding of their personal thoughts and conceptualization of the term, from their perspective. Challenging students to define terminology reorients the learner towards personal reflection, conceptual clarity, and a deeper engagement with DEI and anti-racist education. Requiring students to take ownership of their definitions liberates both the learner and educator from the oppressive power dynamics present within what Paulo Freire describes as the “banking model” of education (Freire, 1970). Defining terms in their own words can increase students critical thinking, creativity, and overall personal agency. This practice aids in cultivating a classroom climate where both teachers and students can proactively co-construct knowledge rather than students passively receiving it (Winn et al. 2019). Providing students with opportunities to recognize, challenge, and self-reflect on their own interpretations of critical issues within DEI fosters conscientization—allowing them to become literate in reading the world by critiquing systemic inequalities (Freire, 1970; Junker, 2011;

Kishimoto, 2018). This humanizing process contributes to interpersonal interrogation of terminologies within a nuanced context, ultimately limiting the chance for students to disengage or develop surface level understandings and applications of issues surrounding race and equity (Senel, 2023).

In the second quadrant, *deconstruct*, the learner is tasked with breaking down their definition into its simplest form. The learner must now reorient their current comprehension of the term by critiquing their assumptions, misconceptions, and misunderstandings surrounding the term in the process. Similarly, Sjoberg & McDermott (2016) championed the process of deconstruction exercise to decolonize language as a powerful pedagogical tool by highlighting the importance of critically analyzing racialized language. About this the authors concluded: “[Deconstruction exercise] is an anti-racism strategy adopted by Indigenous academics and students as a tool to address unexamined, racist language in a measured manner that avoids the emotive or combative nature of unstructured discussions about the impacts of racism” (p.44). Engaging with deconstructing language and terminology surrounding DEI as a practice of learning equips both students and educators with the necessary critical thinking skills to avert perpetuating power imbalances within educational discourse. This segment of the 4D Exercise continues to set the conditions for the learner to take ownership of their educational experience. Studies have shown that students who actively take agency in deconstructing racial terminology and DEI concepts as a process of learning, can confront their own biases through self-reflection, leading to more critical and socially aware perspectives (Bright & Nokes, 2019; Chhabra, Rajdeo, McGuirk, John, & Castaldi, 2024; Engberg, 2004; Kernahan, Zheng, & Davis, 2014). Empowering the learner to actively deconstruct misunderstandings and misinterpretations helps them overcome resistance to the exploration of not only anti-racist practices, but also their own personal transformation towards becoming anti-racist (Aveling, 2016).

In the third quadrant, *develop*, the learner is tasked with dreaming and reconstructing the term with new learnings, knowledge, and perspectives. This section of the exercise is done in community. Learners co-engage and co-construct new insights with the power of shared knowledge through dialogue by co-imagining and co-dreaming (Mayo, 2005; Pietersen & Plaatjies, 2023). Learner’s cultural perspectives are illuminated as they can co-imagine and codream through their respective cultural lenses. Put plainly, learners audaciously imagine and dream, weaving elements of culturally inclusive education and anti-

racist education, to formulate a pedagogy aimed towards dismantling oppressive paradigms, ideologies, and constructs (Lorenz, 2013). The exercise's design recognizes the emancipatory power imagination and dreaming possess in the process of becoming. Learners are invited to fully develop the term or phrase to its most idealistic outcome. Here the learner is encouraged to leave the oppressive constructs of a world imbued with racism and welcomed to imagine a world of their own making. Liberation is experienced when students are allowed to freely dream. Kubi et al. (2022) acknowledges how Black youth utilize the concept of "freedom dreaming" where imagination is used as a method of resistance but also as a means of critical action. It must be acknowledged that imagination and dreaming as resistance is necessary in such a tense sociopolitical climate. Matters concerning DEI and anti-racist practices in education and beyond can be seen as precarious, to say the least. However, by engaging in humanizing pedagogical practices, learners are allotted the opportunity to not only imagine and dream, but also to take action as change agents in making those dreams become reality (Freire, 1970; Shih, 2012).

In the fourth quadrant, *decide*, the learner makes a choice! As a result of defining, deconstructing, and developing this term, they must decide what they have resolved to do about it. How will they make a commitment to incorporate the decision into their daily lives? Students here are tasked with making a concise and declarative decision on their course of action based on their new learnings and experiences. Students are challenged to see themselves as capable beings that can transform society (Freire, 1970). By engaging with the 4D exercise surrounding matters concerning DEI, students are liberated towards a critical consciousness endemic to all change agents (Pangiraj & Gabriel, 2019). Research has shown that when students are given the opportunity to partake in classroom structures like the 4D exercise, they are more apt to initiate dialogue and hold peers accountable for their learning (Bolin, 2017; Loh, 2015; Webb, 2009). Therefore, students become the very change agents necessary to transform their respective learning environments (Miller, 2005).

Conclusion

The 4D Exercise serves as a tool to assist educators in their never-ending quest to curate learning activities which pro-actively address issues concerning DEI. Having adequate learning practices which align explicit beliefs concerning anti-racist practices with explicit instructional actions can increase practitioners' willingness to teach

on matters of DEI. Real-world education demands an emphasis on challenging systemic inequalities while fostering a balanced and healthy social and political awareness (Darder, 2011, 2018; Roberts, 2016). Instructional tools aimed at assisting educators in this endeavor are crucial in establishing a tangible mechanism to combat oppression. No matter how hard educators try to remain neutral within our practice and profession, [un]fortunately education is never neutral. On this Paulo Freire wrote:

Education either functions as an instrument that is used to facilitate integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity to it, or it becomes the practice of freedom, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world. (Freire, 1970, p. 34–35)

The current understanding for the purpose of education continues to be stretched and redefined. As educators, we are tasked with unpacking our own understandings of the purpose of education and providing students the opportunity to do the same. Moreover, embedded within the moral fabric of education is the ethical demand for teachers to fully embrace all matters of diversity, equity, and inclusion. For teachers across the nation we have the unique ability to trailblaze innovations in teacher education that reflect our diverse educational landscape. *The 4D Exercise* does not fulfill all requirements for educators in this regard; however, it does provide a practical tool to begin the process of developing a pedagogy grounded in anti-racism.

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