

Frequently Asked Questions about Affinity Groups in Schools

Based on the most up-to-date research and best practices, we advocate and actively support the development of affinity spaces for both students and adults. Recognizing the importance of on-going identity development, we believe that affinity groups are a vital part of supporting and empowering all members of a school community.

Dr. Beverly Daniel Tatum (2017) outlines the **ABC** approach to show how affinity groups can develop a climate and culture of engagement on campus:

Affirming Identity, Building Community, Cultivating Leadership

“Recognizing the importance of engagement across difference is an essential dimension of preparing the next generation for effective participation in a pluralistic world.”

Affirming identity “is not contradictory to, but rather a prerequisite for building community” and that “students who feel that their own needs for affirmation have been met are more willing and able to engage with others along lines of difference.”

Q. What are affinity groups?

The term “affinity group” refers to a gathering of people who all share a similar identity. Some examples are a young women’s group at the high school or a students of color mentoring program at the middle school. First Grade is a type of affinity group structured around age, and a school alumni group is another example. Although members of the group may share a common identity, such as gender or race, it does not mean that everyone in that group shares the same experience. Rather, participants recognize that their identity has an effect on the way they move through the world. Affinity groups enhance cross-cultural communication. They provide a space for reflection, dialogue, and support. Generally, participation in affinity groups is voluntary.

The goal of affinity groups is to facilitate positive identity exploration and development towards the larger goal of creating an inclusive and thriving learning environment. These kinds of groups offer a time and space for empowerment of the individual and of the group within the greater community.

Q. Aren’t affinity groups just another type of exclusion? Isn’t this model divisive when we should all be working together?

Affinity groups are created to meet a particular identity development need in a school. These are places where students and adults can develop a better understanding of how their own identity shapes their experiences. By becoming firmly rooted in their own identity, community members are in a much better position to understand the experiences of others. Research from both the business world and educational institutions has demonstrated that affinity groups are a necessary component for the healthy development of organizations. They create space for better communication and understanding that allows people to work and learn together in an equitable way. They in no way take the place of cross-racial dialogue, but rather enhance our ability to develop authentic and principled relationships across race.

Q. What about issues of “reverse racism”? Can’t white people be discriminated against? Don’t they need a group, too?

Certainly, whites and people of color both experience the effects of racism. Yet, since any “ism,” be it racism, sexism, or classism, signifies a power imbalance, we can’t have the condition of “reverse discrimination.” Of course, women can demonstrate prejudice towards men just as whites can experience racial prejudice from people of color. Yet, the systematic denial of opportunities and resources is predicated on one group being able to deny another group what it needs based on the power one side has over another. While both privileged and under-represented groups pay a price for any form of discrimination, the way those groups experience that discrimination is very different. Affinity groups create a space to explore how a particular aspect of our identity might be impacted by prejudice or discrimination and what we can do to counter the negative effects.

So, an antiracist white racial affinity group would look at the price that white people pay for the existence of racism and would develop strategies to leverage white privilege to challenge systems that benefit white people over people of color.

Q. What exactly happens in affinity groups?

Students and adults in school affinity groups use the time and space to share personal successes, to reflect on their own identity development, and to support each other in addressing issues that arise for members of their self-identified community. A facilitator sets ground rules, creates an agenda, supports active involvement of all participants in the group, and poses questions to members of the group for discussion.

Q. I can understand how affinity groups at the adult level or even the high school student level make sense, but aren’t the primary grades/middle school years too early a time to start this work?

Research has shown that children, by the age of three, are actively involved in sorting their world. At this early developmental stage, they are aware of difference as they engage in sorting blocks, animals, colors, people, etc. Therefore, to ensure that the noticing of difference does not turn into some kind of deficit, it is critical to support children in their awareness of each other’s difference and to connect them positively to their own identity. Children are empowered to face and challenge prejudice and ignorance by the tools and experiences we give them. When educators and adults do not help young children develop healthy cultural identities, then our larger culture, media, and their peers are ready to do it for us. We know that the personal exploration and resulting confidence that students develop in affinity groups is essential to supporting young children.

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