

Reauthoring Rights in Education Systems

Rightful presence is a foundational construct for building systemic equity and justice in education. One of its guiding principles is attending to systemic power dynamics to ensure educational policies and practices are equitable and just for students across the intersections of race, ability, ethnicity, gender identity, religion (or spiritual preference), economic status, sexual orientation, nation of origin, age, and immigration status (SWIFT Education Center, 2025). That is, school systems must work to ensure that those who are closest to their systemic inequities are afforded the right to reauthor rights in ways that co-create a culture of belonging and justice. This brief explains what it means to reauthor rights, how this may occur, and several contrasting examples of systems that extend rights and systems in which those rights are reauthored.

Reauthoring Rights

Consider how an education system might build systemic equity via reauthored, rather than extended, rights, that, in turn, shift the day-to-day power dynamic in the school.

First, consider what happens when those in power, such as a predominantly white school board and administration, extends rights to such groups as students of color, those identified with a disability, English Learners, and the LGBTQIA+ student community. These educational leaders often perceive their “hospitality” differently than the student groups experiencing it.

The widely held perception is that caring education professionals are inviting these students into the main school culture and academics as an

act of compassion, leading to experiences of opportunity and success. The lived reality is that the group with systemic power (education professionals) extends that invitation with often unidentified, impersonal, or even unintentional expectations of groups that lack systemic power (students, families, communities).

The professionals expect the invited groups to quickly and gratefully assimilate into mainstream school culture and curriculum, even though it has been historically oppressive to them. In this way, the professionals are making access to opportunity and success contingent on their acceptance of these students. That is, this approach makes education professionals the ultimate gatekeepers of student experience within learning spaces.

In the table below, contrast how those in power think that extending rights works, and how those who experience extended rights actually experience it.

How those in power think extending rights works:	How extending rights really works for those not in power:
Caring and compassionate educators invite minority students into mainstream school culture and academics.	Caring and compassionate educators are hosts that hold the power to invite or deny students access as guests in the system.
Students will then feel welcomed and comfortable.	Students carry the burden of finding a way to assimilate, or suffer rejection or punishment.
If students work hard enough, they will achieve and meet their academic goals.	Acceptance often necessitates hiding authentic identities and cultural links.
Opportunity and success awaits.	Opportunities are only extended to those that are accepted.

Following are a few examples of what is meant by extending rights, and why these actions fall short of a culture of rightful presence.

- A transgender student is cast in a school play as a main character, but is encouraged to play the role in a more traditionally gendered way so as not to “upset” the audience.
- African-American students form a Black Student Union at their school, but remain unrecognized by other school groups and faculty because their platform is seen as too divisive.
- A student with autism that engages in stimming behaviors, such as humming or repetitive noises, is invited into a general education classroom during certain times in the day when the behavior is not “disruptive to the learning of others,” but spends most of the day in a separate classroom setting.
- Students from a refugee community are welcomed into the general classroom once they exhibit English proficiency, but prior to that are expected to learn English in a separate setting.
- A Native American student refers to the United States in papers and assignments with terms commonly used by their tribe to describe this land and loses grade points for doing so.

In contrast, professionals can foster rightful presence first by valuing the identities and experiences of non-dominant student groups and recognizing the value of their contributions to learning. The professionals can become allies and make ways for these contributors to join in reauthoring rights in the education system. As Calabrese Barton & Tan (2020) state:

When allies, such as teachers, help students to challenge and transform what participation in the disciplines entails or what meaningful representations of learning look like, they are engaging in politically oriented acts of reauthoring rights as a part of disciplinary learning. Such modes of support involve both pedagogical and ideological

commitments in that they shape opportunities for humanizing participation by valuing students as cultural and whole people, whose knowledge/ wisdom, experiences, and fraught histories are integral to disciplinary learning. (p. 436)

Examples of what schools might look like when students, communities, and educators work together to reauthor rights include:

- A transgender student is cast in a school play as a main character. Their performance is unique and delights the audience.
- African-American students form a Black Student Union at their school and receive a budget from the student activity fund.
- A student with autism that engages in stimming behaviors, such as humming or repetitive noises, uses an AAC device to contribute to class discussions. Educators and peers value the student's contributions and engage with them using the student's preferred method of communication.
- In the grade-level classroom, students from a refugee community are valued for the ability to understand multiple languages. The other students in the class are learning to use Google translate to understand and respond in the student's primary language during group discussions.
- A Native American student refers to the United States in papers and assignments with terms commonly used by their tribe to describe this land. In class discussions, they share these terms with classmates and everyone learns more about the history of the land where they all live.

Conclusion

Recall, realizing rightful presence in an educational system requires those who are not presently in power to become contributors to reauthoring

rights, rather than passively receiving extended rights. Creating these conditions requires collective action from all parts of an educational system to change culture, policies, systems, and practices. See the Rightful Presence Implementation Guide (swiftschools.org) for ideas about how to get started on the journey in your community. See the Rightful Presence Implementation Guide (swiftschools.org) for ideas about how to get started on the journey in your community.

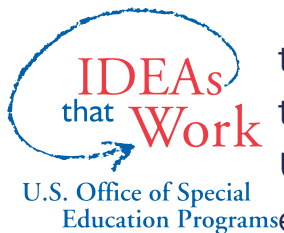
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References

Calabrese Barton, A., & Tan, E. (2020). Beyond equity as inclusion: A framework of “Rightful Presence” for guiding justice-oriented studies in teaching and learning. *Educational Researcher*, 49(6), 433–440. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X20927363>

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