Equity in the Classroom

Equity, particularly equity in education, is being discussed today with a new intensity. The increasing income gap, the simultaneous erosion of social safety nets and civil liberties, and the disparities in the treatment of people based on race and other characteristics—all are contributing factors to a society that is becoming polarized around issues of inequity. To the individual who wants to be part of a solution, the forces that have created this dense web of factors may seem massive, immovable, and overwhelmingly complex.

In education, inequity applies at every level, from federal policy to state- and district-level funding down to the individual school, classroom, and student. In this article, we will explore the meaning of equity, including the difference between equity and equality, provide a brief overview of how federal policies addressing inequity have shifted over the past few decades, touch on systemic versus individual bias, and dive into instructional strategies that can help tackle inequity where teachers have always made a difference to their students: in the classroom.

What Are We Talking About When We Talk About Equity?

Let's start by defining equity. In education, equity is about creating a level playing field for all students so they can succeed in their education. Australian researcher Geoff Masters comments, "[S]tudents are treated 'equitably' when their unequal starting points are acknowledged and when attempts are made to differentially meet individual needs." Masters references recent research at Yale that found that people generally value fairness over equal treatment—that is, they recognize that there are circumstances where it's more important to be fair than to distribute resources equally. Masters concludes, "In an 'equitable' school system, students' special needs and unequal socioeconomic backgrounds are recognised and resources (for example, teaching expertise) are distributed unequally in an attempt to redress disadvantage due to personal and social circumstances. Here again, 'equity' is achieved by prioritising fairness over equality."

EQUITY VERSUS EQUALITY

This raises a common point of confusion regarding equity in the classroom. Often we use the terms "equity" and "equality" interchangeably, but the two terms are not one and the same. The Glossary of Education Reform explains that "equity is the process; equality is the outcome." That is, when equity is achieved, all students will have an equal chance at educational success. Not all students need the same type of support, so it doesn't make sense to treat students equally. Rather, as Masters points out, we must support each student by addressing their own specific needs, whether through scaffolding, differentiation, offering varied modalities, or some other method, so that all students are provided with the same opportunity to achieve their goals.

TYPES OF INEQUITY

Race, gender, language, social-emotional challenges, and learning disabilities are all common areas of classroom inequity. Some of these barriers, such as language, learning disabilities, and social-emotional needs, are easier to identify and therefore easier to address. Yet even when teachers apply curricula intended to mitigate these inequities, the teachers may unconsciously communicate lower expectations to the students in those programs, setting up a self-perpetuating pattern that follows them throughout their academic career. Other forms of inequity based on race, gender, or socio-economic background are

difficult to tackle systematically, and may present unique challenges if teachers do not realize that they are themselves perpetuating harmful biases.

Another area of inequity that the outbreak of COVID-19 brought into sharp relief is digital inequity. As schools across the nation were forced to rapidly transition to distance learning, students without access to a computer, tablet, or the internet weren't able to get to their virtual classrooms. Digital inequity is not new, however. In-school digital inequities were already firmly in place before COVID, due to differences in budgets and access to technology across school districts. In high-income districts, students may have access to up to 10 times the resources— including technology, after-school activities, sports programs, enrichment opportunities—available to students in low-income districts. The high-income students are likely to have access to technology at home as well, reinforcing what they learn in school and giving them plenty of practice to gain fluency online. In districts with a concentration of low-income residents, lower tax revenue leads to lower school budgets overall. Underfunded schools are unable to keep pace with technology, and are unable to counteract their low-income students' lack of access to technology at home. These students' lack of ease navigating digital settings can have long-term cumulative consequences over the course of their schooling.

A related example is the increasing interest in online testing for children at every grade level. These tests are

easier to administer and grade, and easier to update when needed. With the shift to distance learning with the pandemic, online testing is even more likely to become common. But a 2019 study found that even students from high-income demographics and well-funded schools experience lower test scores when taking tests online rather than on paper. And "children from low-income families, English language learners, and students with disabilities were disproportionately harmed by switching to online tests." The outcomes of this testing not only affects the individual student: cumulative test scores can be used to assess the effectiveness of schools and districts. Giving disadvantaged students greater practice with technology in the classroom, providing accommodations to students with disabilities, and helping students to understand on-screen instructions and graphic conventions like dropdown menus and radio buttons can help restore digital equity in the classroom.

Trends in Education Equity Policy

Federal efforts to achieve greater equity in the American education system have lost ground in recent decades, following the documented progress after the Great Society reforms of the late 1960s. Those reforms included desegregation of schools and changes in school funding to bring low-income schools into parity with schools in high-income areas. Reforms that took place in other domains had an

impact on student achievement, as well. For example, the War on Poverty concentrated on social issues; some of its initiatives directed greater funding to poor rural and urban schools, focused on reducing childhood poverty, created magnet schools, and invested in attracting and keeping talented teachers at previously under-resourced schools. As a result of these reforms, which resulted in higher per-pupil spending and lower student-teacher ratios, achievement gaps in reading and math diminished throughout the 1970s and metrics like graduation rates, post-graduation wages and income, and the poverty rate showed measurable improvement for black students. According to Linda Darling-Hammond, writing for the Learning Policy Institute, "Overall, the Black-White achievement gap was cut by more than half during the 1970s and early 1980s. Had this progress been continued, the achievement gap would have been fully closed by the beginning of the 21st century." However, significant cuts in federal programs since the 1980s have reversed this trend, and today the inequities are greater than they were in 1968.

"In 1968, the Kerner Commission issued a report concluding that the nation was "moving toward two societies, one black, one white—separate and unequal." Without major social changes, the Commission warned, the U.S. faced a "system of apartheid" in its major cities. Today, 50 years after the report was issued, that prediction characterizes most of our large urban areas, where intensifying segregation and concentrated poverty have collided with disparities in school funding to reinforce educational inequality, locking millions of students of color from low-income families out of today's knowledge-based economy." *– Linda Darling-Hammond, Learning Policy Institute*

Overcoming Systemic Biases

Systemic biases are those biases that are built into the whole system and may be invisible to those within the system. And, as the National Equity Project points out, harmful policies and practices exist both at the level of individual institutions and across structures (education, health, transportation, economy, etc.), interconnecting and reinforcing each other over time. An example of systemic bias is the disparity in resources offered to students in (usually majority-white) well-funded school districts and low-income districts where students are primarily people of color: **"these structural inequities produce inequitable outcomes, which then reinforce harmful stereotypes about students of color and students living in poverty, and which are then used to justify inequitable practices, such as holding low expectations, academic tracking, and punitive discipline in schools." Another is the use of language, literature, cultural norms, and situations in standardized test questions that are familiar to white, middle-class or upper-class students; students of color, low-income students, or English language learners are less likely to recognize them, and thus the tests are biased against them from the start.**

Bringing equity to the system requires a dual approach: taking a system-wide view in order to dismantle institutionalized inequities and replace them with equitable systemic practices, and taking a personal, reflective look at our own individual biases as a start to practicing new behaviors.

It is especially important for teachers to take a thorough look at their instructional practices, considering their own biases and how they may show up in the classroom. It is uncomfortable and difficult to examine our own personal biases, even if they're unintentional, but that is the only way to move forward and best serve all students. As education blogger Hedreich Nichols encourages, "How do you eat an elephant? One bite at a time, of course—and achieving equity is no different. Take small bites that can have big impact and don't worry about getting it wrong sometimes, as you inevitably will. If you keep going, you can do something that brings about change."
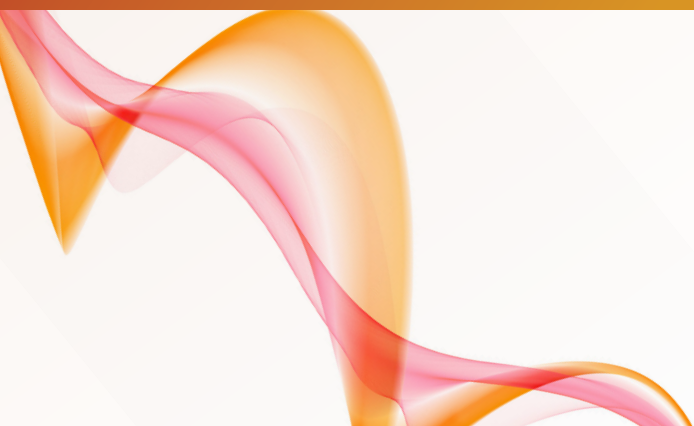
Here are a few ways to tackle cultural, racial, and gender inequity within your classroom:

- Get to know your students as individuals: their personalities, their backgrounds, their families and interests, how they learn best, how they approach problem-solving, their strengths and weaknesses, the settings where they do best (one-on-one or group settings?), what they need in order to learn. This will build their trust and help you to differentiate your instruction for each student.

- Do not ignore different cultures in your classroom. Instead, celebrate them and incorporate them into your instruction, so that students gain a sense of belonging and confidence, allowing them to open themselves up to learning experiences. One small example is to use names from many different cultures when giving examples or telling stories.

- Choose activities that center around universal phenomena that are inclusive to all students—focus on something they have in common. It's even better if the activity sparks a rich cultural discussion. Make sure the activities will not exclude students who do not have the necessary background knowledge, and that the vocabulary you use is understandable and relatable for all your students.

- Make use of the many online resources that will increase your awareness of systemic inequity in education, help you reflect on your own biases, and give you tools that you can use in your classroom. Some examples are Teaching Tolerance, NEA EdJustice, Rethinking Schools, the National Equity Project, and these bias-free language guidelines.

Instructional Strategies

Educators can use several strategies to assist students and their unique needs so that the entire classroom has an equal chance at success. It is important to note, though, that achieving equity does not mean lowering expectations for your struggling students. In fact, your standards should remain high for all of your students, or those who struggle may start to believe that they are incapable of reaching the same goals as their classmates. Instead of lowering standards, empower your struggling students by building their confidence, showing compassion, and offering tailored instruction, using some of the following methods.

Acceptance of failure. It's important that teachers cultivate a safe environment where struggling and failure are accepted and even encouraged. Help students see failure as a regular part of the learning process, a stage that gives the student useful feedback and data to consider. If a student feels shame after failing, they will become less open to learning and less willing to communicate their needs. To cultivate this type of environment in your classroom, consider normalizing the experience by asking all of your students to each share a learning process or concept they've struggled with.

Flexibility. When creating an equitable classroom, flexibility is key. Be prepared to teach using multiple modalities, diversify your assessment approaches, and mix up your classroom seating arrangement to accommodate students in need of social support and collaboration. Consider trying this example of flexible assessments: rather than handing out a multiple-choice assessment, have students construct models and discuss them in small groups; then open up the discussion to the whole class. This will provide you with a deeper understanding of students' comprehension, and also allow students to demonstrate their understanding using their preferred modality.

Differentiation. As teachers, we know that differentiated instruction is at the heart of solving inequity in the classroom. It recognizes students' differences—in learning style, knowledge base, language skills, culture, physical ability, and interests, to name just a few—and offers them a wide variety of instructional and assessment techniques tailored to their unique needs. Your differentiation tactics will be based firmly on a foundation of knowing your students as individuals and assessing their knowledge, understanding, and skills.

Scaffolding. In this instructional strategy, teachers may break up a task into smaller, more manageable parts for students who are struggling to understand a concept. The teacher then slowly tapers off the amount of support that they lend the student, gradually leading the student to gain a stronger understanding of the content with greater independence. Like construction scaffolding, teachers provide successive levels of temporary support that help students reach levels of comprehension and skill acquisition that they would not be able to achieve without assistance.

Scaffolding is an effective form of support, but teachers should be careful to only provide scaffolding when students demonstrate a need for it. Even then, students should be given an appropriate amount of processing time before support is introduced. Offering scaffolding too soon can result in students relying on extra help when it is not actually needed, thus preventing them from experiencing the necessary productive struggle. Educators can balance scaffolding by introducing support at the right time, and letting students work their way toward independence rather than developing reliance upon that support.

Social-Emotional Learning. Social-Emotional Learning. SEL skills combine self-management, self-awareness, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making, skill sets that are not usually part of the typical curriculum. Yet tackling these life skills concurrently with lesson content is essential to giving students the tools they need to succeed academically and in life beyond school. And, as every teacher knows, every student is in a different place developmentally. Discussing what these skilled behaviors look like and providing students opportunities to develop them during varied classroom activities can give them the practice, insight, and confidence to grow on a social and emotional level throughout the school year.

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