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Start with Equity to Achieve Equality in the Classroom

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Teaching Effectiveness
Inclusive Strategies

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"…the direction in which education starts a man, will determine his future life." – Plato, The Republic, Book IV

As educators, we anchor our teaching principles in the values of equality and fairness to ensure the success of our students. Yet, layered atop the grounding ideals of equal opportunity for all students is the rugged reality in which, we too, as educators have emerged from our own specific contexts and carry with us deeply embedded beliefs that may transcend intentional thought. These specific contexts may, further, lead to unconscious stereotypes known as "implicit bias," and can be detrimental to the way we engage with our students (Implicit Project, 2011). In particular, educators who were raised in the United States have been shaped within the cultural milieu of systemic racism and structural inequities in education. We carry that training with us and as a result may be utilizing instructional approaches that are, as Koch (2018) describes, "inadvertently exacerbating contemporary structural inequities" (p. 2).

In order to improve our students' learning experience, it is important to uproot implicit biases and explicitly consider inclusive strategies. To start, if we want equality in our classroom, then we must, first, address equity.

Equality versus Equity

While these terms are often used interchangeably, within education the term 'equality' is commonly used to describe a universal expectation that everyone has the same standard and should achieve the same outcomes within a course. All students are held to the same end goal of achieving those outcomes. This typical usage differs greatly from the term 'equity,' which the University of California Davis (2020) identifies as the following:

The guarantee of fair treatment, access, opportunity, and advancement for all while striving to identify and eliminate barriers that have prevented the full participation of some groups. The principle of equity acknowledges that there are historically under-served and under-represented populations and that fairness regarding these unbalanced conditions is needed to assist equality in the provision of effective opportunities to all groups. (University of California Davis, 2020)

To delineate between the common usages of equality versus equity in education further, consider a 400-yard sprint. Equality is analogous to the finish line. Equity is the starting point and resources to get to that end. For example, one could hardly call a sprinting competition fair if some sprinters were able to start at the 200-yard mark and others at the 10-yard mark. Or, if some sprinters were provided with shoes while others wear only socks. All sprinters race to the same finish line

but some are disadvantaged from the start. Equity may be viewed as the measures taken to address the disadvantages of varying starting points and different resources. We can readily acknowledge these disadvantages in a sprinting metaphor, but systemic inequities in education can be much more difficult to identify. Yet, as educators who are committed to equality and fairness in standard measurements of learning, we must also pay attention to the starting points and resources for each one of our students. The research is overwhelming that students of color, first-generation college students and low incomes students are at a disproportionate disadvantage from the outset of their journey in higher education (Koch, 2018). Knowing that cultural and socioeconomic aspects do impact learning, it becomes clear that if students are not starting from the same point or possess comparable resources, then they do not have the same opportunities to reach the educational finish line and achieve the same outcomes. In other words: to achieve equality, equity is vital.

Closing the equity gap with inclusive pedagogy

In the classroom, we should commit to promoting equity. Ambrose et al. (2010) further explicate:

Even though some of us might wish to conceptualize our classrooms as culturally neutral or might choose to ignore the cultural dimensions, students cannot check their sociocultural identities at the door, nor can they instantly transcend their current level of development… Therefore, it is important that the pedagogical strategies we employ in the classroom reflect an understanding of social identity development so that we can anticipate the tensions that might occur in the classroom and be proactive about them. (p. 169-170).

While no one educator can solve for systemic inequities in the field of education, all educators can personally play a part in closing the equity gap and making for a fairer educational system through the classrooms we create. Whether virtual or in-person, an equitable classroom holistically improves student learning. As Quaye & Harper (2007) suggest, "When faculty use a more culturally inclusive approach to teaching, results lead to better cognitive development, perspective taking, critical thinking skills, academic achievement and problem-solving skills" (p. 2). In order to promote equity, we should first seek to reflect on our own dispositions, values, beliefs, and align our actions to demonstrate best practices that promote inclusive pedagogy. In doing so, we take an intentional stance towards building an equal and equitable educational experience for our students.

Some strategies for promoting inclusion in the classroom include:

- Establish trust and rapport early by getting to know your students.
- Outline course expectations to include student input.
- Spend time making a conscious effort to pronounce names correctly, refer to students by their given name, and make eye contact.
- Share your pronouns and encourage students to share theirs.
- Personalize your connections by meaningfully sharing an insight about yourself that is relevant to the course or the class topic.
- Take time to teach students how to participate in small groups.
- Ask your students for feedback.

By recentering inclusive pedagogical practices, we can play our part in promoting greater equity and closing the educational chasm that, too often, leaves students starting from too far behind.

What are some other instructional strategies that can promote an inclusive classroom?

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