EQUITY IN EDUCATION

A Guide for Educators

the equity collaborative

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Introduction

One of the most common questions that educators ask with regard to equity is this: What does equity mean?

Equity has been defined both in really broad terms (e.g., "giving every student what they need to succeed") and using narrower conceptions (e.g., "ensuring that students have access to rigorous content and academic opportunities").

As with every definition, there are nuances — particularly with something as dynamic and far-reaching as the concept of equitable school environments. The answers lie at both ends of the spectrum AND somewhere in the middle.

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Working toward equity in education starts with the belief that all children are entitled to an education rooted in justice, free of racist and gender-exclusive practices and policies, as well as inaccurate historical depictions. Furthermore, educators and school and district leaders should strive for high levels of consciousness around racial literacy, gender equality, ableist practices, and actions that disenfranchise students who have minimal economic and social resources. Achieving high levels of consciousness around equitable practices is not easy, but in order to fulfill the promise of a free and public education, we must meet this challenge. Working toward equity also involves identifying goals, engaging in constant practice, implementing changes, and measuring outcomes.

The concept of public education is a radical idea. Every state in the union individually — and the federal government collectively — has committed to providing a free, public education to every child. This commitment comes with the responsibility to ensure that every child has access to

a physically and psychologically safe learning environment, excellent instruction from well-prepared teachers, as well as rigorous content and resources that support their learning.

The data have proved over and over that optimal learning environments are not currently accessible to every child. Thus, we must look at working toward equity as both an opportunity and a challenge.

The opportunity of working towards equity lies in America's promise to fulfill the educational and psychological needs of every child at every public school institution. When adults create classroom spaces that are inclusive, where students feel a true sense of belonging and have access to instruction and content that are culturally responsive, those students can imagine a world that values their identities, regardless of race, gender identity, ability status, and socioeconomic status.

The challenge of ensuring equity lies in the fact that on the whole, schools do not meet the needs of all children. Qualitative and quantitative data support the claim that students from historically marginalized populations (Black, Latinx, and Indigenous students, as well as students with special needs and students with minimal or no economic resources) many times attend schools that have not adequately met their educational needs. Thus, meeting the challenge of ensuring equity for these students and others requires active, ongoing self-reflection, as well as a commitment to dismantling inequitable practices and policies, providing access to rigorous content, delivering culturally responsive instruction, and ensuring opportunities for all children. All of these things need to be accomplished at the level of the instructor, school leader, and district leader.

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Learning environments that are built around equitable principles have the potential to positively impact students inside and outside of classrooms. Educators, administrators, and board members that are committed to equity have the ability to build equitable schools. Schools with a clear commitment to ensuring equity can be the catalyst to change the

educational system as a whole, so that student outcomes can no longer be predicted based on race, gender, socioeconomics, ability, or any other sociocultural factor.

What Is Equity

The root of the word equity is derived from a single Latin word, *aequus*, meaning "level" or "just." We conceptualize equity as having two parts. Working towards equity means:

1. Eliminating the predictability of success and failure as determined by race, gender, socioeconomics, or any other sociocultural factor.

2. Interrupting and dismantling oppressive practices, structures, and policies that are barriers to access and success.

Many people say they want to advocate for equity, but interrupting inequitable practices and the systems that perpetuate them is hard work.

Throughout this section, definitions of the different types of equity will be offered. These definitions are not meant to be comprehensive. Rather, they are meant to illustrate the intersectional nature in which equity or inequity exists.

Equality and Equity — What is the difference?

Equality denotes a degree of equivalency. It means that people receive the same resources, the same support, the same opportunities. Even though the American social order tends to place a lot of value on equality, as a society we do not live up to the ideals of equality.

No, everyone does not have the same chances and opportunities. No, everyone does not receive the same education. No, everyone is not born into families that have significant resources to support the success of future generations. If we intersect these inequalities with the reality of racism, sexism, gender inequality, and social and economic repression, we have the

recipe for a system that does not work for all people. These inequalities are further highlighted when we examine the institution of schooling.

When we work towards equity, we recognize that people do not start on equal footing. The fact that we are all human beings with our own identities, abilities, ideas, and skills means that we are inherently unequal. Thus, the process of overlaying this notion of equality on individuals and institutions is doomed from the start. Working towards equity means erasing the barriers that stand in the way between people and opportunity. Working towards equity means that outcomes can no longer be predicted by one's race, gender, or other sociocultural factor.

> *Many people say they want to advocate for equity, but interrupting inequitable practices and the sytsems that perpetuate them is hard work.*

If we truly want equitable outcomes, we cannot wait for them to come about by treating all students equally. We must accommodate different students' learning needs, cultural backgrounds, circumstances, and aspirations. Different students need different supports and resources than others. Different students need different opportunities. Furthermore, much school content is written without the narratives of marginalized populations in mind. While culturally relevant content is not the sole determinant of success in schools when it comes to the education of students from marginalized populations, it remains an important factor.

In order to better understand equity in general — as well as racial equity, gender equity, and economic and social equity specifically — we have provided some basic definitions of terms that we use throughout our work. These definitions are by no means comprehensive or static. They are always open for analysis and change.

Racial Equity

In order for us to work toward racial justice and racial equity, we must first acknowledge that inequitable systems and racist practices have existed in the United States since the country's inception. The concept of race is a social construct that was meant to sort and select and determine

one's freedom, access to wealth, and one's participation in the democratic process.

Achieving racial equity is a process — a process that will remain ongoing for a long time to come and that must actively involve everyone. Equity in education must acknowledge the historical systems of oppression and their impact on students, families, and educators. To work towards educational equity, we must address each student, not just groups of students or students as an aggregate. As we talk about different racial groups as either privileged or oppressed, we must remember that educational equity and an emphasis on individual needs go hand in hand.

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Gender Equity

Gender and gender identity in public school spaces have been hotly debated and talked about topics in the last several years. Suffice it to say, the dominant cultural narrative supports and values the norms of a white, male, cisgender identity. As a result, girls in general, and girls of color specifically and students who identify as LGBTQIA+ (regardless of gender identity), face marginalization in public school settings. Furthermore, much school content is written without the narratives of marginalized populations. As such, historical events in social studies, literature, and concepts in math and science do not tell the unique stories, nor do they accurately represent the identities of the various gender identities.

Working towards gender equity includes, but is not limited to, positive representations of people of different gender identities in content, access to educational opportunities for people who represent marginalized gender identities, intentional recruitment of girls and students who identify as LGBTQIA+ in courses where they are underrepresented, and dismantling

of written and unwritten policies that discriminate against people with marginalized gender identities.

Economic and Social Equity

Schools are microcosms of larger societal structures. Within schools, there are economic and social hierarchies. Economic and social power within schools translates to access to funds of knowledge, opportunities, and resources. Students with little economic and social power have less access to the things that would help them be more successful. Also, schools tend to respond more favorably to students and families with economic and social power, giving those students access to the support systems that are essentially required for school success.

Schools should dedicate their resources to balance the scale of economic and social power for students who lack this among peers, teachers, and the power structures within schools and districts. Most schools that do this successfully implement specific programming to benefit marginalized student populations and also find ways to provide leadership responsibilities to those students and their families.

Implicit Bias

Implicit bias is defined as the mental process that creates unconscious associations and attitudes toward people and groups of people based on characteristics such as race, ethnicity, gender identity, age, appearance, and sexual orientation, among others. Implicit or unconscious beliefs and attitudes about people of color are referred to as "implicit racial bias." Implicit bias falls within a wider psychological framework called implicit social cognition.

Implicit bias is based on the idea that what one says out loud is not necessarily a good indicator for how they think or how they might behave. Implicit biases exist even if one doesn't know they exist. Implicit biases

are latent thoughts that, once turned into actions, can advantage or disadvantage the receiver.

No one is immune from implicit bias, regardless of whether they subscribe consciously to stereotypes. Biases are hardwired into our brains, and they are more likely to surface when we find ourselves in stressful or emotional situations.

Further Reading

- bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation*
- Derald Wing Sue, *Microaggressions in Everyday Life*
- Beverly Daniel Tatum, *"Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?": A Psychologist Explains the Development of Racial Identity"*

Understanding Systemic Oppression

Education Oppression Timeline: History at a Glance

In order to address the current inequities in schools, we must understand the history of public school education and marginalized communities. In this history, we see efforts to prevent certain groups from accessing a public school education (the poor, differently abled children, women, minority racial groups), as well as acts of resistance to include, support, and educate marginalized groups.

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Efforts to create equitable learning environments in the U.S. are constantly challenged by those who want to maintain the status quo. Scan or click the QR code to view a timeline of how inequities have manifested in policy and practice.

Equity-mindedness versus Deficit-mindedness

Equity-mindedness is a type of cognitive frame. Dr. Estela Bensimon describes it as "a way of approaching educational reform that foregrounds the policies and practices contributing to disparities in educational achievement and abstains from blaming students for those accumulated disparities." In other words, approaching educational equity from a position of equity-mindedness means changing the schools themselves, not endeavoring to change the students at those schools.

> *Equity in education is not impossible to achieve, nor is inequity in education a naturally occurring phenomenon.*

To be equity-minded is to be conscious of inequities and how those play out in American society. That means being cognizant of how students of color and other marginalized groups experience different outcomes. It means understanding that the predictability of those outcomes exists because of patterns of inequity over a long period of time. It also means taking personal responsibility. Equity in education is not impossible to achieve, nor is inequity in education a naturally occurring

phenomenon. It takes individual, collective, and systemic changes in order for us to make progress towards equity.

Deficit-mindedness is a mindset that looks at a student who is not successful, by school district standards, and blames that lack of success on the student's, family's, or community's perceived shortcomings. Educators who operate from a position of deficit-mindedness sometimes have the very best of intentions. They might want the student to succeed. But to achieve that success, they place the onus on the student. They want the student to assimilate, rather than acknowledging that the school itself may very well have contributed to the student's lack of success.

Choosing equity-mindedness over deficit-mindedness is crucial. We must not only ask how we can remediate students who are not succeeding. We must also ask why schools are failing to produce success for them. Individual effort counts for a lot, but it doesn't count for everything — not even close.

Further Reading

- Derrick Bell, *Faces at the Bottom of the Well: The Permanence of Racism*
- Ellen Berrey, *The Enigma of Diversity: The Language of Race and the Limits of Racial Justice*
- Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, "Rethinking Racism: Toward a Structural Interpretation"
- Jessica DeCuir and Adrienne Dixson, "'So When It Comes Out, They Aren't That Surprised That It Is There': Using Critical Race Theory as a Tool of Analysis of Race and Racism in Education"
- Sonia Nieto and Patty Bode, *Affirming Diversity: The Sociopolitical Context of Multicultural Education*

Practicing Cultural Responsiveness
What is Culturally Responsive Teaching?

To practice culturally responsive teaching is to be proactive and intentional in paying attention to students' multiple identities. Engaging students in this manner makes the learning environment more personalized for each student and makes it easier to meet each student where they are. It also makes it easier to recognize where each student excels, where they need help, and what circumstances determine those gifts and needs.

Culturally responsive teaching is about employing pedagogy that prioritizes students' thinking, students' culture, and students' schema. Famed scholar, author, and activist Gloria Ladson-Billings teaches us that all teaching is culturally responsive. The crucial question is this: To whose culture does the instruction respond? As educators, we must continue to access students' funds of knowledge and use that understanding to build upon what they already know, what they are good at, and what they want to get better at.

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One of the misnomers about culturally responsive teaching is that it is just meant for students of color. Every student, regardless of race, enters the classroom connected to a culture. Thus, classroom instruction is culturally responsive when it responds to the cultural and academic needs of the students within that class. Culturally responsive teaching is about accessing those cultural schemas and adjusting the instruction to respond to students and help them build additional schemas.

How Do You Practice Culturally Responsive Teaching?

It is common for educators to ask that we, as equity coaches, give them a set of strategies that they can implement the very next day. While we understand the nature of this request, culturally responsive teaching is

a practice that takes time and that educators must engage in regularly. Furthermore, no one group of students are a monolith that would respond to a list of strategies upon demand.

At our core, The Equity Collaborative is a coaching organization. We work with educators to understand where they would like to grow and change and implement changed practices due to their own growth. Growth is a process; thus, there is no cookie-cutter approach to apply that growth to real-world classroom settings. With that in mind, the practice of culturally responsive teaching involves the application of one's own growth process, the understanding of the abilities and identities of the students in the school or classroom, and custom-designing instructional practices that meet the needs of those students.

> *Growth is a process; thus, there is no cookie-cutter approach to apply that growth to real-world classroom settings.*

While there are some evidenced-based strategies that have shown promise with regard to equitable practices in classrooms, many of those strategies are contextual. Thus, strategies in and of themselves only work when they meet the needs of individuals. The literacy researcher Alfred Tatum says that providing teachers with strategies alone is akin to giving someone a hammer, nails, and a blueprint and instructing them to "go build a house."

> *Culturally responsive teaching involves a complex and ongoing process of self-discovery on the part of the teacher.*

Culturally responsive teaching involves a complex and ongoing process of self-discovery on the part of the teacher, engaging in deep learning about the needs, aspirations, and funds of knowledge of the students. It also involves the creation of a classroom culture that prioritizes the brains of the students, not the teacher. Thus, it is crucial that teachers believe that their students can and will be successful, and it is up to them to figure out the ways that *they* want to be successful.

The Benefits of Culturally Responsive Teaching

Let us be clear: Although Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and students from other marginalized populations directly benefit from culturally responsive teaching, it is not a strategy just to engage your students of color. Every student has a culture. Every child has an identity. Every student has experiences outside of school. Every student can benefit from culturally responsive teaching. Thus, every student has a cultural schema. Simply put, cultural schema is the way that we as human beings see the world and see ourselves. We base our perceptions on our racial identity, religious affiliation, language assets, and family traditions. These things serve as building blocks upon which we build our understanding of the world.

"Culturally Responsive Pedagogy" describes the type of instructional engagement that produces the best results for students. A culturally responsive teaching approach will:

> *Every student has a culture. Every child has an identity. Every student has experiences outside of school. Every student can benefit from culturally responsive teaching.*

• Ensure that students' identities are valued and make them feel comfortable to assert their identities and be their full selves in school spaces.

• Allow students' thoughts, ideas, and approaches to learning to take shape and be applied in ways not previously thought of.

• Provide students with access to ALL content, particularly the content that matches and values their context and worldview.

• Include students from marginalized populations so they are not thought of as "other" or "minorities," but as an integral part of functioning of this society.

• Challenge teachers to consider multiple means of engagement, multiple means of representation, and multiple means of assessment.

• Support teachers to access students' funds of knowledge and cultural schema and use that to scaffold new concepts.

• Allow for the continued growth of student learning and not measure

success or failure only on a time continuum.

While this is not a comprehensive list of all the benefits of culturally responsive teaching, it represents many of the benefits that are not articulated using quantitative measures of success or failure.

Further Reading

- Zaretta Hammond, *Culturally Responsive Teaching & The Brain*
- Randall Lindsey at al., *Cultural Proficiency: A Manual for School Leaders*

Conducting an Equity Assessment

Before the path to equitable learning environments for any school or district can come into focus, it's important to get a clear picture of where things currently stand. A systemic equity assessment can help organizations understand and recognize areas where improvements can be made.

The Equity Collaborative's equity assessment uses both quantitative data and qualitative interviews to generate a report illustrating students', families', and educators' experiences, celebrating existing practices that support student learning, and highlighting opportunities for school districts to engage with equity to improve student experiences and achievement. An equity assessment provides context for an organization, school, or school district to create actionable, achievable, and sustainable goals rooted in the experiences of students, families, and educators.

Quantitative: Measuring and Identifying Equity Gaps

Most schools, school districts, and organizations already track relevant data that will support the goals of an equity assessment. We partner with organizations or schools to utilize the data that is housed within their data

collection platforms and review those data through an equity lens. These data tell part of the story about who succeeds and who needs support; however, the story cannot be fully told until districts endeavor to hear the actual voices of the people who are ultimately impacted, students and families.

Qualitative: Interviews and Focus Groups

Purposeful listening comprises an important part of any effective equity assessment. It is in these interviews with students, parents, and educators that we understand the stories behind the numbers. The listening portion of an equity assessment creates a safer space where stakeholders can share authentically about their experience, as well as the strengths of, areas for growth within, and hopes for their school community.

Topics that may be discussed in qualitative interviews include understanding how students perceive discipline policies and practice, who is recommended for higher level coursework, or how families learn how to navigate the school system. From our experience, students from marginalized groups who participate in focus groups around questions of educational equity have felt a sense of validation or affirmation just by knowing that their experiences, both positive and negative, are of genuine interest and concern to authority figures.

The Equity Assessment Report

After listening to stakeholders, we review and codify the data. This allows for themes to emerge which inform a series of recommendations. Our questions are structured under five different frames:

- Affirming students' identities.

- Supportive and collaborative learning environment.

- Caring and supportive educators.

- Responsive teaching and learning practice.

- Equitable learning environments.

Each one of these frames has both a research and evidence base in making schools and districts more responsive to students' needs. After analyzing data collected from the interviews, we develop recommendations for the organization to implement moving forward.

Examples of recommendations include:

- Defining diversity, equity, and inclusion and including them among the school's or district's core values.

- Creating additional opportunities for educators to engage in professional learning about equity and implicit bias.

- Working toward a cultural responsiveness framework to inform curricular and instructional efforts.

- Establishing short- and long-term action plans to address hiring practices through a diversity, equity, and inclusion lens.

- Assembling student groups in order to encourage, value, and amplify student voices. Students should be allowed to share their experiences and have those experiences taken into account in professional development planning for teachers, curriculum and instruction planning, and influencing discipline practices and policies.

- Establishing proactive measures that intervene and mitigate the impact of racial incidents experienced by students of color in order to build an inclusive culture that does not tolerate harassment.

- Establishing a clear policy with built-in accountability for addressing racially motivated acts of harm, and creating proactive leadership responses to address incidents where racial harm is perpetrated.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR EQUITABLE OUTCOMES

Equity Coaching

At The Equity Collaborative, we approach each conversation, each engagement, and each opportunity to work with educators with the express intent to help educators grow and change. At our core, we are a coaching organization. Coaching for equity allows individuals to engage in self-reflection, critical thinking, and goal-setting in preparation for working towards equity.

An equity coach will value what you bring to the table, seek to understand historical events that have influenced you, and challenge you to expand beyond the status quo. In this engagement, you make your thinking visible and the coach asks a series of follow-up questions that seek to push you to the metacognitive space. An essential part of the coaching relationship and the growth process is fostering a space in which you can identify personal goals and work with a critical friend (coach) to help reach those goals.

When clients engage with a coach, they become part of a dynamic relationship. While the coach may rely on research-based practices and skills developed within professional settings, each coach/coachee relationship is different. This means that there is no "off the shelf" program or learning package that can be accessed.

As coaches, we utilize three essential skills when working with a client:

- Follow client answers with another question.

- Do not ask questions that you already know the answers to.

- Do not give advice unless asked more than once.

Working toward equity is a recursive process that requires practice, self-reflection, and repetition. We believe that coaching is the best way to work toward equity while engaging in that process.

Listening as a Culturally Responsive Skill

A common complaint among people who come from racially and culturally marginalized groups is that the dominant culture does not listen to them. When people of color point out acts of racism and injustice, they are many times met with cries of disbelief. When women speak of gender discrimination, they are often called names or deemed too sensitive or emotional. When people who identify as LGBTQIA+ speak of maltreatment, they are often disregarded or ignored.

Equity is multifaceted. As such, so are inequities. Thus, when individuals speak of the myriad ways that they experience racial, gender, and economic discrimination, they can be speaking about all of these forms of inequity occurring at once.

When we use listening as a culturally responsive skill, we are able to hear the experience of those who have not been listened to. Listening as a culturally responsive skill creates the space for interrupting bias and understanding equity/inequity and oppression. As we grow in our listening skills, we become better practitioners of culturally responsive teaching and equity-centered coaching. Listening is at the core of each one of these endeavors.

As we mentioned in the section about implicit bias, our brains are designed to perform some tasks subconsciously without us even knowing it. We can breathe, listen, walk, and see all at the same time. Impulses and information are sent to our brain for processing. Our brains process the information and send out the appropriate responses. Our lungs expand and contract, sounds are deciphered and made sense of, we can move in an upright fashion and balance the weight of our bodies, and images are transmitted and we make sense of the image that we see. When we take the time to truly listen, it slows down our subconscious brain and creates the

space for us to learn, challenge our assumptions, and find connections with those who are different than us.

Further Reading

- Linda Darling-Hammond, "Teacher Education and the American Future"
- Sonia Caus Gleason and Nancy J. Gerson, *Growing into Equity: Professional Learning and Personalization in High-achieving Schools*
- John MacBeath et al., *Strengthening the Connections between Leadership and Learning: Challenges to Policy, School and Classroom Practice*