Creating Equitable Learning Environments: An Equity Literacy Framework

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Introduction

- Greetings
- New School Year Envy
Introduction (cont’d)

- A bit about me
- A bit about my work
A Bit About My Experience

- Since 1998 have worked with schools across the US
  - Faculty development
  - Organizational change
  - Assessment regarding equity and diversity
A Bit About My Work

- Largely focused on equity and diversity practice in educational institutions
  - Gaps between philosophy and practice
  - Gaps between “best practice” and actual practice
  - Common “pitfalls” (or how schools operationalize “diversity” in ways that create more inequity)
Introduction: Where We’re Going

1. Introductory Blabber (in progress)
2. High-stakes standardized quiz
3. Calisthenics
4. The Equity Frame
5. What We Can Do
6. Discussion
Starting Assumptions

• All students deserve access to the best possible education we can provide for them, regardless of race, class, gender, and so on.

• A combination of bias and inequity means that this access is not equally distributed.

• Everybody in the room has good intentions and the power to help change this reality, but good intentions are not enough.

• We don’t have the power to change everything, but we have the power to change some things.
Warm-Up Activity

A High-Stakes Standardized Assessment to Warm Us Up for the School Year

Humility & Cognitive Dissonance
Quiz

A majority of poor people in the U.S. live in:

- urban areas
- suburban areas
- rural areas
Quiz

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- suburban areas
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Quiz

Who is more likely to be addicted to drugs or alcohol?

- Poor people
- Middle class people
- Wealthy people
Quiz

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- **Wealthy people**
A Princeton study of elite universities found that legacy applicants—people, usually white and wealthy, with a parent or grandparent who attended the institution—are far more privileged by legacy status than applicants of color are by affirmative action policies. The study determined that legacy status was equivalent to how much of a boost to an applicant’s SAT score?

- 20 points
- 90 points
- 160 points
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Quiz

Everywhere it has ever been measured in the US, what has happened to local crime rates as more and more undocumented immigrants move into a community?

- They increase
- They stay the same
- They decrease
Quiz

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Quiz

The three richest people in the world have as much wealth as:

- the 8 poorest countries
- the 48 poorest countries
- the 308 poorest countries
Quiz

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* * *
A Humanistic Frame
I've been thinking...

-Diversity conversation often becomes an *anti* conversation:
  - anti-student
  - anti-teacher
  - anti-people-who-advocate equity (trouble-makers!)
  - anti-parent/guardian
  - anti-administrator

I can relate in some ways. But where does the *anti*- come from?
What It's Really About

My hypothesis:

- We're *all* dehumanized in a lot of ways
  - Deprofessionalization of teaching
  - Under-appreciation (or even invisibility) of staff
  - Crazy test score pressures
  - Expectation that we will do education in ways we know are not best for kids
  - And on and on and on...
FOR A FAIR SELECTION EVERYBODY HAS TO TAKE THE SAME EXAM. PLEASE CLIMB THAT TREE

Our Education System
A Moment of Reflection

- What are the ways you have felt dehumanized in the context of your work?

- What are your *anti*-feelings? How much energy do you give those feelings?

- Not saying that some of that isn't real and even justified, but when we're stuck in *anti-* it can be hard to be *pro-*-, and equity work, in the end, is *pro-* work.
The Challenge When It Comes to Equity

- How do we work with one another and students and families to make schooling a more humane experience for all of us?

- How do we persist in what is, to many, an increasingly repressive system and keep our souls intact?

- Do we have the humility to recognize ways we feel dehumanized and ways we dehumanize?
Morning Calisthenics

Acknowledging One Another’s Shared and Diverse Humanity
Reflections

1. We all experience some privilege, we all face some oppression

2. Diversity is complex and it’s about a lot of different things

3. People experience the world in different ways

4. The trouble with “culture” as a central framework
Equity Literacy

The story behind the frame:

Celebrating the joys of diversity
Components of Equity Literacy

1. Recognize
2. Respond
3. Redress
4. Sustain
Important Concepts

1. Mitigative / Transformative Approach
   • Starfish story / Baby in river story

2. Interest Convergence Theory
Diversity Ideologies

- Deficit Ideology
- Grit Ideology
- Structural Ideology

Remember: Ideology drives policy and practice (poverty research)
Diversity Ideologies

- Deficit Ideology
- Grit Ideology
- Structural Ideology

How have you seen these ideologies in practice?
Examples

Deficit | Grit | Structural

- Family Engagement
- Behavior Referrals

What ideology drives diversity initiatives in your sphere of influence?
Common Approaches to Equity

1. Celebrating Diversity
2. Learning About Cultures
3. Representational Inclusion
4. Equity Literacy

Think in terms of classroom practice, in terms of PD, in terms of leadership and “framing” of diversity...
1. Celebrating Diversity

Characterized by:

- Surface-level cultural activities
- Stereotypical generalizations of “cultures” (Taco Night)
2. Learning About Cultures

Characterized by:

- Focus on learning about cultures, often in ways that minimize or essentialize them (“Latino culture”; “African American culture”)

- Focus exclusively on those in the “minority” while ignoring inequities
4. Representational Inclusion

Characterized by:

- Ensuring that the curriculum “includes” diverse voices and experiences
4. Equity Literacy

Characterized by:

- Tending to even the subtle biases and prejudices in our classrooms
- Developing the skills and knowledge necessary to recognize, respond to, and redress inequities
What Is Equity?
Preparing Ourselves to Teach and Lead with Equity Literacy
Step One: Recognize my biases and prejudices

- Yes, we all do have them.... Even you.
- And oddly, none of us wants to have them, do we?
- Remember humility...
Step One: Nature of bias and prejudice

The nature of stereotyping

- Selective evidence-gathering
- In-group favor

My friend and road rage
My friend and the cable descrambler
Low-income kids and shoes
Step One: Nature of bias and prejudice

- My friend and road rage
- My friend and the cable descrambler
- Low-income kids and shoes

THE FACE OF ROAD RAGE

- The likelyest road rage culprits are men aged 35-50 driving blue BMW’s.
- 31% of road rage offenders said that shouting or swearing was the most common way they expressed their anger.
- 11% of a randomly selected sample of 750 drivers reported that they always or sometimes carried a gun (nearly loaded) in their vehicle.
- 56% of the men surveyed said they experienced rage on a daily basis versus 44% of the women.
Step One: Quick example

Fact: low-income families show up less often than wealthier families for in-school opportunities for family engagement

The question: Why? How is this fact interpreted?

Once we interpret correctly, we can respond correctly.
Step Two: Recognize and respond to implicit and explicit biases
Step Two: Recognize

Examples:

1. Compliments
2. Informal interaction
School-Level

What We Can Do: Best Practices in Equity Education

(Which turn out, oddly, to be best practices in general...)
Examine All Learning Materials for Bias
Provide Opportunities for Students (and Staff) to Share Anonymous Feedback

- People who are marginalized often don't feel empowered to share feedback
Incorporate Arts and Music

- Students with access to arts and music education are more engaged and do better academically – especially important for low-income students.
Integrate “Diversity”

- Students respond better when it is woven into the curriculum and culture rather than introduced as a supplement or add-on during a special month or celebration
Reach Out to Families Early and Often

- Marginalized families tend to hear from the teacher only when something is wrong, creating an adversarial or negative relationship with the school.
Be Thoughtful with Technology

- Careful about homework
- Careful about how we get information to families
Family Involvement

- Make sure opportunities for family involvement are accessible to all families
PE, Recess, and Movement

- Try to incorporate as much movement as possible into teaching
Inclusiveness

- Evolve inclusiveness: it can be very powerful to use children’s books with diverse characters when the story is not just about diversity
Doing Good

- Learn about and teach about ways that famous people from history contributed to a more equitable and just world (and don’t whitewash human rights heroes)
  - Twain/Keller/Einstein
  - MLK/Parks
Upper-Leadership-Level

What We Can Do: Best Practices in Equity Education
People have no reason to trust positional leaders who are silent on oppressive conditions, like:

- the privatization of public schools
- the imposition of crazy amounts of high-stakes testing
- the deprofessionalization of teachers...
Lean Toward Transforming, Not Just Mitigating

- Equity efforts should focus on eliminating inequity, not on mitigating the symptoms of inequity
- Anti-bullying programs / anti-heterosexism programs
Acknowledgement

- Acknowledge the work diversity advocates are doing and, in some cases, have been doing for years with little recognition and often in the face of strong resistance.

- Worst possible scenario is that these folks burn out and walk away.
Set Expectations

Leadership (both school and district) must set expectations that people are to do their part to make schools and classrooms equitable.

But equally important, schools need some measure of accountability for those who choose not to “participate” in this commitment.
Place Equity First

- Effort on addressing educational inequities must be prioritized

- Starting with policy and clear indications (through accountability measures) that racism, sexism, and so on, even when it’s unintentional, is not acceptable and carries repercussions
Doing What’s Effective, Not What’s Hot

- End the epidemic of the adoption of cool or popular (and uncool) “diversity” paradigms and programs despite lack of evidence that they make a school or school system more equitable
- Ex: Culture-specific “learning styles”
Provide Ongoing and Advanced Professional Development Opportunities

Often schools are stuck in the “awareness-building” process, so that the conversation starts over each time—instead, provide a group of dedicated folks with professional development to continue doing the work in a more advanced and sustained way.
A Few Final Reflections
Thank you.

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