



The Equity Challenge

By Pat Fontana

All students get a pencil. That's equality. It has nothing to do with equity. Those students who need the school internet to complete their assignments can stay after school to do their work. That's closer to equity but still does not take into consideration why those students need the school internet or whether those particular students are able to stay after school.

Students who have no internet at home and have no access to a ride home after school will be given time during class to complete their assignments. That's equity.

A culture of equity starts at the top, with the superintendent, but equity in the classroom is achieved by the teacher. Teachers who understand their students in terms of their community and their individual situations are the ones who will make the difference for those students.

High school social studies teacher Katherine Mitchell recognized that many of her students were not able to stay after school for tutoring or to work on their assignments. Either the students themselves worked, their parents worked and could not pick them up, or their family had no available transportation. So she arranged her class schedule to give them the time they needed during class to use the school Internet to complete their work.

Mitchell also recognizes that her classes are diverse, socioeconomically and culturally. "When a student acts unruly or is sleepy all the time, there's usually more to the story," she says. One student, in particular, had been pegged as a troublemaker by other teachers when he did not pay attention in class and was falling asleep almost every day. Mitchell pulled him aside and asked what was going on. He told her that his father had left, and the student had to hold down a job that kept him out late at night to help support his family.

Disparities in the classroom such as family income level and cultural differences can put certain students at a disadvantage. They may not have the resources they need to succeed, including something as simple and seemingly obtainable as that pencil. These students also may not get the support they need from family. If the family is low income, for example, the student may need to take on a job that keeps him or her out late at night instead of being able to spend that time studying and completing assignments.

These disparities show up in test results and in overall academic achievement. ACT has studied college readiness by family income and found that lower income students consistently scored lower on their tests. In their 2015 College Readiness Benchmark Attainment by Family Income report, ACT found that only 13 percent of

students from families with incomes under \$36,000 met all four benchmarks on the test compared to 42 percent of those students from families with incomes over \$100,000.

EQUALITY IS NOT EQUITY

While equality and equity are both essential in the classroom, they are not the same thing. Experts agree that disadvantaged students need more than just the pencil that is given to all students. Equity starts at the top, with the superintendent, and manifests itself in the classroom with the teacher.

Diversity, inclusion, and equity expert Raymond Terrell says that teachers are the key to equity in the classroom. Terrell defines equity as "providing each student with what they need, not providing all students with the same thing." He adds that "what schools traditionally do is give every student the same thing" and that is equality, not equity.

Terrell is now a professor emeritus, having retired from 50 years of professional experience with diversity and equity issues. He has been involved in the education system from all sides and at all levels, as a middle school and high school teacher, elementary school principal, superintendent, and college professor, and dean. Before he retired, he served as the associate dean of the School of Education at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio.

Terrell sees two major equity issues in the classroom: socioeconomic differences and issues of culture and race. Having worked with schools across the country on issues of diversity, inclusion, and equity, Terrell says that he "can predict academic outcomes based on the makeup of the students."

Typically, Terrell says, "schools are set up for mid to upper class white students." Teachers and administra-

tion are then quick to find fault with the students when they don't do well on their assignments or don't pass their tests, but they do not recognize the fault in the system itself. Terrell notes that "as long as we look at the students being the issue, we can't solve" the equity issue. Schools must adjust to meet different needs and that starts at the top, with the superintendent.

Instilling a school culture focused on equity and diversity is an ongoing process. Professional development must address the issues of equity within the school and must be provided by someone who has experience working directly with a diverse student population. Given the high teacher turnover rate, those professional development sessions must be provided on a continuous basis and

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must include all school staff. Terrell advises that the cultural responsiveness of the school must be to "provide teachers insights as to what different students need."

The teacher is the key. "What happens with the teacher is going to make a difference," Terrell emphasizes. When the teacher takes the time to get to know the individual students as well as develop a clearer understanding of the communities in which they live, then the teacher can really start to reach students who come from different backgrounds.

Often, the problem stems from a predetermination of how a child is going to perform based on the student's socioeconomic status, race, or even disability. Teachers and administrators still form opinions of their students on day one of the start of a new

school year, sometimes simply based on how the student looks coming into the classroom.

THE CHALLENGE OF IMPLICIT BIAS

Ruth Turner, chief of student support services and social emotional learning for the Rochester City School District, says that “every human being has biases” and that it is “a natural result of how our brain works.”

Rochester is a large school district with a great deal of diversity and poverty. Approximately 84 percent of its 28,000 students are students of color, including African American and Hispanic, as well as students whose families are from Somalia, Nepal, and Afghanistan, among other nations. There are 30 different languages spoken throughout the family populations in the district. Rochester has been ranked third in the nation in childhood poverty. However, the teaching population within the district is primarily made up of white females. As Turner summarizes it, “We face multiple challenges in our city and in our school district.”

Implicit biases, Turner says, “lie in the subconscious way that our brains filter information.”

Teachers often have an implicit bias as to which students will perform and be successful and which will be disruptive and aggressive. Even though the teacher may deny any explicit prejudices, implicit bias still exists. That’s just human nature, as Turner emphasizes. When a group of students includes several from a different culture, several from low-income families, and several from different races, the teacher will generally automatically form expectations around which of those students will be troublemakers and which will be high performers.

Turner offers an example of teacher influence as a result of implicit bias. Relaying a true story told to her by a student at a high performing high school, she says that two students were good friends and were both in an advanced class. They both scored a 12 out of 20 on a particular test. One student was black and her

close friend was white. On the white student’s test, next to her score, the teacher wrote “I expected better of you.” The teacher made no such notation on the black student’s test, sending the message that her score was exactly what was expected of her.

To address the issue, Turner recommends district-wide training for everyone on implicit bias, including looking at what equity means as well as the social justice framework. Self-reflection can often help participants identify that implicit bias within themselves.

Given the very nature of implicit biases, it is difficult for a teacher or an administrator to recognize their impact on how students are treated, which can lead to equity issues within the classroom. An implicit association test developed and administered by Project Implicit at Harvard University can help those who take it identify and work on their biases. The Implicit Association Test (IAT) measures “attitudes and beliefs that people may be unwilling or unable to report,” by measuring “the strength of associations between concepts (e.g., African American, homosexual) and evaluations (e.g., good, bad) or stereotypes (e.g., athletic, clumsy).”

The results of the IAT may or may not be surprising. Turner states that 75 percent of all participants nationally have a positive bias toward whites. Taking the IAT can help teachers and administrators “look at how implicit bias plays out in the day-to-day” operations of the classroom and how it can impact students.

RESOLVING THE CHALLENGE

Turner and Terrell agree that consistent, ongoing training is necessary for teachers and administrators to resolve the equity challenge. Recognizing implicit biases and consciously working to overcome them through professional development sessions can have a positive result in the classroom for the impacted students.

Professional development sessions must focus on identifying gaps and learning how to achieve equity in schools. They are best led by those with experience in the educational system, Terrell adds, and not by outside consultants. Having been in the classroom as a teacher, in the school as a principal, and in the system as a superintendent, he knows

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of what he speaks. His recent work has been focused on teaching teachers how to better understand their student populations.

Terrell says the fruits of his labor and the labor of many others are beginning to pay off. Many of the districts that he has worked with are “beginning to address issues of race and class in educational progress.” Schools are beginning to understand that they need to do something different.

In the classroom, that means having a teacher who understands the community, including the specific issues students and their parents face. It means having a teacher who has taken the time to get to know each student as an individual, rather than making assumptions based on implicit bias in regard to race, culture, or socioeconomic status.

Equity in the classroom also means designing tests that are appropriate for the student population and for the material being taught. Too often, standardized tests include terminology or concepts that are not familiar to students from certain backgrounds and cultures. Terrell cited the word “banister” used in one test that was clearly not understood by many of the students. Instead of teaching to the test, Terrell recommends that the “process of



testing needs to be changed to allow students to be tested on material they've been taught" and that is relevant to them.

When teachers take the time to understand that their students may be out late at night working to support their families, are struggling to grasp the material because of their cultural background and/or experiences, or do

not have the resources they need to complete their assignments, they can make those adjustments needed to ensure that, as Terrell emphasized, they are "providing each student with what they need, not providing all students with the same thing."

Recognizing and overcoming implicit biases, identifying where gaps exist for disadvantaged students, instilling

a system-wide culture of equity, and engaging with students to understand their community and culture are critical steps to overcoming the challenge of equity. Terrell says that many schools are beginning to understand these steps and that "things are beginning to really improve."

Schools are finding ways to evolve, starting with the culture of equity instilled by the superintendent, reinforced by the principal, and put into practical application by the teacher.

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