

# Equity vs. Equality: 6 Steps Toward Equity

Seven steps toward classroom equity include knowing every child, celebrating their potential, recognizing their challenges, becoming flexible, acknowledging inequity, and using culture as a resource.

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I coached Jane in her third year of teaching ninth-grade English in a high school with many English-language learners (ELLs). Her style leaned toward direct instruction, and she did a great job of modeling literacy strategies. One day, I observed Jane leading a mini-lesson on paragraph revision. As I sat beside an ELL named Veronica, I noticed that her "paragraph" was one long run-on sentence. With Veronica's permission, I made a copy of the paragraph for Jane.

"Ugh!" she sighed when she saw it. "What do I do with this?" Veronica had a clear learning gap around punctuation and syntax.

"Well," I said, "you get to teach her. What do you know about her schooling experiences in El Salvador? You set a goal to individualize instruction this year, and this seems like an opportunity to practice. Why not pull Veronica aside tomorrow to offer targeted support?"

"But we have a quiz!" Jane responded, almost forlorn. "There's never enough time."

"Why," I pushed gently, "does she need to take the quiz more than she needs to sit with you and learn how to structure a paragraph?" It was a simple question, but I saw signs of awakening on Jane's face. "You're right," she finally said. "I never considered my ability to make choices like this. Tomorrow, I'll work with Veronica one-on-one."

## Equality vs. Equity

This vignette cuts to the heart of equality vs. equity in the classroom. If **equality** means giving everyone the *same resources*, **equity** means giving each student access to the *resources they need* to learn and thrive. As those of us who are parents know, each child is different. It can be tough to meet their competing needs, but this is pretty much the job description for parenting and, I would argue, for teaching. Jane could have modeled paragraph revision until she was blue in the face, but Veronica lacked the building blocks of a sentence. Instead, Jane provided this learner with a critical resource: the attention of her skillful teacher.

If we're committed to the success of every child, we must acknowledge the uneven playing field that exists for many: ELLs, students with special needs, children experiencing trauma or relentless poverty, and students of color who confront unconscious biases about their capacity. Walking toward equity will help us to create inclusive, 21st-century classrooms.

## 6 Steps Toward Equity

It's hard to sum up what it means to embrace equity in the classroom. My partner and I are veteran, equity-driven educators, and we wrestled with this question. Complexity duly noted, here are six ways to walk toward equity.

### 1. Know every child.

First and foremost, get to know each student as a unique and layered individual.

Embrace [storientation](#) to learn where they're from, what they love to do outside of school, what their family is like. Don't subscribe to a single story about any child. The more you know, the more you can build trust and differentiate instruction.

### 2. Become a warm demander.

Author [Lisa Delpit](#) describes **warm demanders** as teachers who "expect a great deal of their students, convince them of their own brilliance, and help them to reach their potential in a disciplined and structured environment." An equity stance pushes us to couple high expectations with a commitment to every child's success. Two later posts in this series will unpack this step.

### 3. Practice lean-in assessment.

As you gather a student's human story, start to piece together his or her learning story:

- How does she approach tasks?
- What are his strengths as a learner?
- What does she struggle with?

No standardized test will provide you with quality data on these questions. Use proximity and lean-in assessment to diagnose students' learning needs. Carry a clipboard with you while students are working, and take careful notes on what you observe.

#### 4. Flex your routines.

Remember that one-size lessons *do not* fit all. Jane had mastered the art of the mini-lesson, but she was losing learners in the process. Be willing to flex or set aside your well-laid plans to individualize instruction. If pulling a student out of an activity to support him or her makes you uncomfortable, notice your discomfort and try not to let it control your decisions.

#### 5. Make it safe to fail.

Teach students that failure is just another form of data. When a child feels shame about his learning gaps, he'll hide behind quiet compliance or bravado and acting out. In an equitable classroom, there's no need to hide, because struggle and failure are neutralized, normalized, and even celebrated. Consider this: once a week, have students meet in groups to share something they struggled with and what they learned in the process.

#### 6. View culture as a resource.

Finally, don't be culture-blind. When we ignore students' identities, we efface who they are in the world and lose a rich resource for learning. Understand this simple, powerful truth offered by my friend Zaretta Hammond in her recent book [\*Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain\*](#): "Culture, it turns out, is the way every brain makes sense of the world." Help students activate their cultural schema to access challenging content. Invite them to share where they come from, not just with you, but also with each other. Value and affirm all forms of difference. My next post will focus on ways to promote identity safety in the classroom.

I hope these ideas on a complex topic resonated with you. How do you think about and walk toward equity in your school or classroom?

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