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## Equity in Education Part I: A Strength-Based Approach

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This is the first part of the special series *Equity in Education*.

In a world focusing on sensationalizing the negative aspects of education and equity, experts like Dr. Yvette Jackson, Founder and Senior Scholar of the National Urban Alliance for Effective Education, and Dr. Michele Rivers Murphy, Director of Heart Centered Learning® at the Center for Educational Improvement (CEI), highlight the importance of using a positive, solution- and strength-based lens. For administrators and teachers to help create a culture of equity in their schools, they need to create a community where students feel safe, encourage staff and students to examine their biases, and have conversations around equity using normed language.

Equity has to be practiced at the personal, institutional, and community level. It's important to remember that equality and equity are not the same. Equality is providing everyone with the same resources whereas equity focuses on giving everyone the resources they need to succeed (Sun, 2014). Focusing on equality can help the majority, but for well-being, success, and excellence for all, we must focus on equity. There should not only be an equal distribution of physical assets like funds, infrastructure, and instructional material, but also equal distribution of access to high quality and well trained teachers. A student's ethnicity or zip code should not define the quality of education they receive.



### Start from Within

School culture is heavily influenced by decisions made at the administrative level. Most principals want to provide a fair and appropriate education to all of their students; however, 40% of white principals report that they have not been given sufficient tools to support the needs of low-income students and students of color in their leadership training programs (Superville, 2019). There are many steps on the journey to cultivating an equitable school culture, but it must take root intentionally in school leadership. When principals, vice principals, and team leaders examine their own biases and school policies, they set the stage for other staff members, students, and parents to examine their biases as well. This process is described in [another article](#) in this month's *WowEd! Newsletter*.

Dr. Yvette Jackson thinks a great way to start creating an equitable school community is to come up with a common definition of equity. Often, when educators begin to discuss equity, their focus on what's "wrong" with the system or the child overshadows the strengths and abilities that allow a school to serve students or a student to make contributions to their school community. Collectively deciding that equity is helping all students reach their full potential keeps the focus on student strengths.



### First Steps to Building a Culture of Equity

As staff and students continue to examine their biases, school leaders should ensure that students feel a sense of safety and belonging. To do this while encouraging an equity mindset, talk about the commonalities among people such as their family life, traditions, food, etc. Dr. Jackson says that educators should be asking themselves, "How do we help everyone recognize, have faith in, and build on their potential so they can make a contribution and self-actualize?" She has some ideas:

- Stop looking at weaknesses and find the strengths.** Instead of thinking about why a student is not performing to standards, think about what tools this student needs to reach their full potential as they've demonstrated outside this single assessment.
- Nurture students' strengths and interests.** Art programs should not be cut and students should be given freedom and time to explore their own curiosities to unlock their full potential.
- Examine school policies like tracking and labeling.** In a study of standardized test scores, tracking was shown to damage equity without improving quality (Peters and Oliver, 2009). Consider mixed-ability groups and let students learn from each other.
- Teach all students the highest quality curricula that pushes their creative and critical thinking.** Gifted education curricula, which is designed to bring out the innate potential in children by providing options for the process and the product of education, can be used to create high quality lessons for all learners.
- Teach students about how the brain works and cultivate in them a growth mindset.** When students understand that all of their brains are like a muscle that grows stronger when they exercise it with learning, they begin to internalize the idea that they have the power to accomplish anything with strong effort and the right strategies and tools.

Drs. Jackson and Rivers Murphy will expand on these ideas to move towards a more equitable school culture in the upcoming CEI webinar *Equity for All Students—Especially those who are marginalized*.



### Why Does Language Matter?

"Changing language is about changing the conversation" (Rivers Murphy, 2019). In their decades of research and work on the ground in schools, Drs. Jackson and Rivers Murphy emphasize to educators why it's important to work towards equity in education instead of focusing on inequity. This positive "power of suggestion" can help empower policy makers and educators to make the necessary changes in their school to increase equity.

Focusing on equity involves using a strength-based approach and language that is inclusive to students belonging to different academic, cultural, ethnic and racial backgrounds. Language that otherizes puts a barrier in front of all students' ability to feel belonging and affiliation, two important foundations of building self-confidence and a compassionate school community. For example, using the term "minority" automatically implies that there is a majority that this "other" group will never be able to belong to. Educators can support equitable education by looking closely at the language they use about students and asking themselves if that language reflects an innate belief in the capacity of all children to learn.

### Cultural Competence

Equity cannot be accomplished without practicing cultural competence and inclusion. At the individual or personal level, teachers and other educators have to be more aware of their own cultural biases, critically evaluate their beliefs about students, and cognitively restructure these beliefs to focus on student strengths. [UnboundEd](#), an organization that helps educators reach high quality standards, provides a [bias toolkit](#) that can help schools start culturally competent conversations that lead to understanding and overcoming bias.

Some of the toolkit's tips include:

- Recognize that bias can take subtle forms and respond to bias, discrimination, and inequity.
- Instructional materials should accommodate various cultural perspectives, be sensitive to differences, and adopt classroom strategies that encourage healthy discussions.
- Classroom culture should emphasize building strong relationships. This culture could be implemented through various engagement strategies based on shared interests, values and positive feedback.
- Institutional policies should support and facilitate cultural competence.
- Know that differences and difficult conversations will arise, so be prepared by setting ground rules and group norms (UnboundEd, n.d.).

Educators, education administrators, and we as a community have a great responsibility to educate ourselves and our students about equity in education. We have to take collective responsibility to be more mindful in our pedagogy, policy, and delivery of education: adopt a strength-based growth mindset for a culturally competent and equitable society.

Stay tuned for more about teaching students about equity in Part 3 of this special series, *Equity in Education*.

### References

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