



UNDERSTANDING EDUCATIONAL EQUITY AND EXCELLENCE AT SCALE
A Project of the Annenberg Institute for School Reform

Equity, Difference, and Everyday Practice

Taking a Relational Approach

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As an educational anthropologist, I am interested in listening to how people working for social justice – in particular, in local settings – wrestle with fundamental questions about equity and its relationship to the “differences that make a difference” in education, such as race, ethnicity, class, and disability. In my work, I attend to the multiple, complex, and conflicting notions of equity operating inside real schools (Abu El-Haj 2003, 2006). Following the political philosopher Iris Young (1990, p. 5), I view these as a set of *justice claims*: frameworks within which ideas about equity and its relationship to difference are organized in everyday discourse and practice, constituting a *situated political dialogue*.

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Educational Equity in Practice

Beginning from this perspective, I suggest that to talk about equity, we must take a step back and consider carefully what we mean by *equality*, *opportunity*, and *outcomes*. Moreover, I argue that our answers to these questions turn on how we, as individuals – but, more important, as a society – think about and act upon the “differences that make a difference” in education. From my exploration of these situated political dialogues inside actual schools, I have developed observations about practicing for educational equity in four key areas.

Equality: The Equal Moral Value of Each Member of Society

Equality means focusing on the equal moral value of all people. It may seem absurd to have to make explicit this premise; yet many educational and, by extension, social inequalities, can be understood to derive, at least in part, from a fundamental failure to focus on the moral equivalence of persons. The history of *de jure* racial segregation in United States schools, for example, was based on a refusal to accord all children equal status as human beings. If *de jure* segregation reflected an egregious violation of the commitment to the equivalence of all people, it exposes the fundamental injustices of *all* policies that lead to practices of exclusion. I would further argue that the failure on the part of most states to commit equal resources to the education of all children indicates a social policy that does not accord all children equal moral weight.

The well-documented disparities in the quality of education that different communities receive – disparities that reflect and reproduce structural inequalities of race/ethnicity,

language, socio-economic class, gender, and disability – are also suggestive of this problem (Anyon 1980; Gartner & Lipsky 1987; Noguera 2003; Olsen 1997).

These differences in educational opportunities are supported ideologically through a denial of the moral equivalence of all learners. I mean by this that there is a failure to acknowledge that all people are deserving of a liberating education – one that acknowledges our most basic desire and shared human capacity to make and remake, in our own distinctive ways, a life’s work.

Here I draw on the work of Patricia Carini, who writes of “humanness and the valuing of humanness as the starting point for education” (2001, p. 1).¹ For Carini, this humanness entails “a widely distributed capacity [of all people] to be makers and doers, active agents in the world and their lives” (p. 20). An education that begins from this premise of “widely distributed capacity to be makers and doers” does not tolerate narrow, deadening, limited, and limiting curriculum and pedagogy for any child. If we start from the premise of the universal equivalence of all humans as makers and doers, all children deserve an education that fosters each child’s passions and interests and develops the knowledge, skills, and competencies for that child’s full participation in society.

We must be careful, however, not to conflate *equality*, in this sense, with a refusal to acknowledge our differences, and we must recognize the importance of our collective identifications. Focusing on the fundamental equality of all persons, then, is not a denial of difference; rather, it makes an observation about what we all share as human beings – this impulse to make our world and to make sense of it through myriad different expressions, both individual and collective. This stance suggests that strategies that aim to effect educational equity must be founded on a commitment to the moral equivalence of all persons, but must not confuse *equality* with sameness – a point to which I return in more depth below.

Difference: A Relational Perspective

Equity also demands focusing on, rather than ignoring, *difference* and doing so from a relational perspective. As activists for racial, ethnic, language, gender, sexuality, and disability rights have argued, refusing to *recognize* difference – to acknowledge varied perspectives, experiences, knowledge, values, ways of learning, and so forth – does irreparable harm to students who are excluded from meaningful participation in learning environments as a consequence of the *failure on the part of those institutions* to own up to ways that educational curriculum, practices, and policies usually reflect the vested interests of dominant social groups.

I agree that we need to focus on difference; however, I caution us to think carefully about how differences come to make the difference that they do in educational settings. Educational discourse tends toward an essentialized view of difference as located in the biology of the bodies

¹ John Dewey (1922/1966) wrote in a similar vein of the moral equality of all humans being located in what he called “incommensurability” of all human work.

or the “culture” of particular groups. This view of difference, I suggest, deeply constrains the possibilities for educational equity. Focusing on differences that make a difference in education as if they were located in particular bodies and groups, rather than in the relationships of difference created by the arrangement of societal institutions – relationships that are political in the most fundamental sense that they produce distributions of power – is dangerous. It tends to lead us to focus on either the “deficits” or the “differences” of some groups of people and not see the power afforded by the reigning practices of schools and society to other people – people who are not marked as *different* (Fine 1997). I suggest, instead, that we understand all differences as reflections of *relationships*, thus making visible how particular arrangements of schooling and society make certain differences significant and not others (Fine 1997; Minow 1990; Varenne & McDermott 1998; Young 1990). Difference is best understood as a marker of a political relationship of inequality set up through everyday institutional practices (Erickson 1987; Fine 1997; Minow 1990; Varenne & McDermott 1998).

A relational view of difference does not mean denying the existence of differences (those that are truly biological, like blindness, or those biologically arbitrary markers that come to hold significance through historical and contemporary regimes of power, like racial classifications). It does mean examining how *differences* become *differences that matter* only in relation to specific institutional norms and practices that often remain invisible and unexamined (Minow 1990). I suggest that strategies for equity must begin with reflective dialogue aimed at exposing the invisible norms and taken-for-granted practices that create and perpetuate educational inequalities along the lines of race/ethnicity, class, disability, and so forth.

Substantive Inclusion: Rethinking Opportunities

Substantive inclusion in the school community – the capacity to participate fully and to contribute meaningfully to all its activities – should be the aim of educational equity. This presumption of substantive inclusion requires a broad definition of equity – one that ultimately aims at substantive inclusion into society at large. This definition encompasses the essential goals of equal educational opportunities and outcomes; however, it requires that we ask what we mean by these terms. Substantive inclusion demands that we attend to whether the opportunities offered reflect *real* opportunities from which students can truly learn and benefit (Howe 1997). All students must be afforded educational opportunities that reflect rich, meaningful curriculum and pedagogy and that offer all youth the possibility of learning the skills and knowledge they need to participate as full members of society.

The goal of substantive inclusion suggests, however, that we cannot take the notion of equal opportunity at face value; rather, we need to attend to the ways that all curriculum, pedagogy, and educational practices – all opportunities – reflect the norms, values, assumptions, knowledge, and experiences of particular groups and, as such, may exclude full participation of other groups. When substantive inclusion is the goal, all students need to see their collective identities – their cultural stories, history, and values – reflected throughout their schooling.

When collective identities are absent from or distorted by the school's curriculum, pedagogy, and practices, students are denied substantive participation in their education (Friend 1993; Ladson-Billings 1994; Nieto 1996; Valenzuela 1999).

The concept of substantive inclusion sets a wide parameter for the goals of educational equity. It holds that schools must be responsible for developing young people's cultural knowledge as one key factor contributing to students' capacities to participate fruitfully in their education as well as in society at large. It requires that a school's curriculum and pedagogy must reflect the historically situated experiences, knowledge, values, assumptions, and participatory modes of the various groups that constitute its community. The rationale for this attention to our collective identities reaches well beyond the affirmation of each and every student. It aims to create opportunities for social action and increasing democratic participation (Banks 1997; Ladson-Billings 1994; Nieto 1996, 1999; Sleeter 1996). That is, the knowledge that is developed as the curriculum, pedagogy, and practices reflect multiple perspectives makes it possible for people to contest collectively the dominant narratives and institutional structures that have maintained the status quo.

A New Definition of Outcomes: Including Everyone in the Process of Social Change

Taking a relational view toward difference as the founding premise for building equitable educational practices demands reorganizing institutional practices and redistributing power in ways that redefine "educational outcomes" by implicating our entire society in the process of change. It means unearthing the hidden values and norms buried within taken-for-granted educational practices and exploring how these most basic assumptions allow some students to accrue knowledge, skills, credentials, and power at the expense of others.

Working for equity by taking a relational stance toward difference often results in conflict and struggle as those who benefit from the existing relations of power resist the threat to their supremacy. Across the nation, clashes over educational policies from desegregation plans to de-tracking efforts to the introduction of multicultural curriculum reflect the challenges these changes pose to the status quo. Conflict is an inevitable part of the process of transforming education and building truly equitable school communities, because those who benefit from the existing social order are unlikely to give up their power without a struggle.

Taking a relational stance toward difference does not erase the contentious nature of the process of change. However, it creates a framework within which it is at least possible for everyone to be a part of the solution to educational inequality. When we shift to viewing factors such as race, gender, and disability as markers of *relationships between groups of people* – relationships that are created within a particular social order – then it is those relationships that must be scrutinized and changed in the quest for equity. Transforming those relationships includes *everyone* – willingly or unwillingly – in the process of change.

A Relational Stance in Education: A Framework for Building Equity in Local Contexts

Building equitable educational communities across the lines of difference is messy, uneven, and – given the existing structural inequalities of society – not likely to be fully realized without dramatic changes in the social, political, and economic spheres. There are no easy remedies for persistent educational inequalities; these inequalities are interwoven with the injustices of our society (Anyon 2005; Varenne & McDermott 1998).

Although schools cannot solve the problems of injustice in our society, they continue to be important sites for social activism – places where ideas about justice and difference can be deliberated and negotiated and where equitable educational practices can be developed, implemented, and revised. My work, then, lives in tension with the idea of equity at scale. I suggest that while there are some equity issues that can – even must – be legislated for all schools (e.g., equal funding), working for equity demands ongoing negotiation about educational practice in particular local contexts in dialogue with students, teachers, and community members.

In focusing on discourse about difference and justice, I am explicitly working against the recurring tendency of legislators, policy-makers, and many educational reformers to move directly to practice-based remedies for educational inequality, bypassing critical, contentious dialogue about the sources of this inequality and about various definitions of equity. I suggest that by uncovering the multiple, conflicting notions of justice and difference that operate inside schools, we can better understand why the search for educational equity remains elusive. We can and must engage in dialogue about the broad aims of just, equitable education in a democratic society.

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