



In 7th grade, students can explore equity by using dialogue poetry to examine the concept of power from different perspectives, such as manager and worker.

# VOICES *of* EQUITY

**BEGINNING  
TEACHERS ARE  
CRUCIAL PARTNERS  
AND EMERGING  
LEADERS OF EQUITY  
EDUCATION**

**By Nicole West-Burns, Karen Murray, and Jennifer Watt**

**I**n Ontario, Canada, equity education is a priority for every district school board. Boards, schools, administrators, and teachers must have support in meeting the challenges to move ahead in accordance with provincial equity policy and recommendations.

The Ontario Ministry of Education, recognizing this need in 2009, established an equity policy that states, “To improve outcomes for students at risk, all part-

ners must work to identify and remove barriers and must actively seek to create the conditions needed for student success” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009, p. 5).

Beginning teachers are crucial partners and emerging leaders of equity education. Some of the equity concerns these teachers face are issues tied to representation, achievement, discipline, graduation, and overall school experiences for students who are racialized and historically marginalized.

District school boards are working intentionally to

## TOPICS FOR DEMONSTRATION CLASSROOMS

Grade	Inquiry question rooted in theory	Demonstration classroom focus
Kindergarten	How can I teach students the importance of social justice issues by first focusing on big ideas such as fairness — ideas that students can relate to authentically?	Early learners interrogate inequalities in society while building a positive self-image. Students focus on a picture book on the life of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and apply their knowledge of fairness to their lives and to his life.
Grades 3-4	How might students' examination of newspaper articles on the topic of their community and personal interviews with members of the students' community (including parents) impact students' perceptions of the community where they live?	Students explore the idea that there is beauty and value in their community and answer this question: How do our community heroes add beauty and value to the community?
Grade 7	Can culturally responsive and relevant pedagogy make a difference in a predominantly privileged gifted class and a predominantly underprivileged special needs class?	Students use dialogue poetry to examine the concept of power from different perspectives (e.g. manager/worker, master/enslaved, bully/transgendered person).

improve outcomes and identify and remove barriers for racialized and historically marginalized students because the province has recognized that the responsibility lies with the institutions. However, as the district removes barriers for students, it must create conditions for beginning teachers to become leaders of this work.

Why focus on beginning teachers? As they prepare to work within Ontario schools systems, it is important that beginning teachers understand how issues of power and privilege play out in schools and how these issues affect students. Although this understanding is also important for veteran teachers, districts must begin by supporting this work with their newest teacher leaders.

Beginning teachers have an opportunity to become emerging equity leaders — to make meaning of policies and act as advocates for educational equity in practical ways in classrooms, schools, and boards. This requires a new vision for beginning teachers as transformative leaders who question the status quo, moving professional learning for novice teachers beyond typical models that focus solely on issues of survival, procedures, resources, and classroom management.

In one Ontario public school board, beginning teachers have participated since 2011 in professional learning focused on a culturally responsive and relevant pedagogy framework as well as other issues of equity.

Culturally responsive and relevant pedagogy is based on two theoretical bodies of work that focus on schooling experiences and achievement of racialized and historically marginalized students. This body of work can serve as an anchor for examining beginning teacher practice in Ontario within the current context.

With that in mind, the beginning teachers department

of the Toronto District School Board created a professional learning module on creating culturally responsive and relevant classrooms (see box on p. 37). Beginning teachers engaged in a five-part collaborative inquiry that linked theory to practice, culminating in a visit to a demonstration classroom. The classroom experience allowed beginning teachers to set specific learning goals and use the observations as a basis for how to embed culturally responsive and relevant pedagogy as a part of students' learning experiences.

In spring 2013, beginning teachers who participated in this professional learning module reflected on their equity concerns and how to move forward as emerging leaders in equity education. From their reflections, five key insights emerged.

### 1 Beginning teachers want to talk about race and class.

Beginning teachers want and need the space and time to acquire the ability to talk about the challenging issues that impact education, such as race and class. They find that these issues aren't often addressed in professional learning.

Several beginning teachers noted the deficit views that existed about students, their families, and their communities. The schools where the teachers work serve mostly racialized students in high-poverty areas. Although these teachers described themselves as thinking differently in many cases from veteran colleagues, they did not have a professional space to explore the issues that challenged them connected to race, ethnicity, poverty, and other social identity categories that were brought up in schools and often negatively discussed.

Although several teachers expressed confidence in their thinking about these issues, many said that they did not feel confident in their ability to stand their ground and be able to articulate their oppositional thinking. They said neither their formal educational training nor other professional learning gave them the tools they needed.

One teacher said, “Certain comments were being made (in school). ... I grew up in that neighborhood, and hearing how families were being referred to was really frustrating for me. I didn’t have the strength and knowledge prior to this module to facilitate these conversations. I got the strength to open up these conversations.”

The professional learning module gave teachers a safe environment to discuss uncomfortable issues around race and class. With a deeper understanding of the broader theoretical bodies of work, participants learned how to address issues of oppression that they had experienced. Through case studies, teachers practiced how they might respond in various situations and what policies they could use to support their arguments.

After working with colleagues on difficult conversations, the beginning teachers said they felt empowered to have these conversations within their own school sites.

## 2 Beginning teachers need to learn theory, see it in action, and then talk about it.

Beginning teachers value a model of professional learning that incorporates theory, classroom visitations, and a debrief session, which then acts as a catalyst for them to take action in their own school sites.

What makes a new teacher try something in the classroom? After getting theoretical grounding for culturally responsive and relevant pedagogy, then seeing what that looks like in classrooms, many of these teachers said they felt confident to try to push themselves.

In a debrief session following the classroom visit, the beginning teachers discussed student voice and what they saw with the demonstration teacher. Many participants cited the experiential visit as key to their learning. However, just as many attributed their learning and desire to push themselves on the combined impact of theory, application, and discussion.

One teacher said, “I think it was important to have time to read the theory behind it and then visit the model classroom. ... Even to have that period of time afterwards to ask the teacher questions and think about what if we did this or that. ... If any of those pieces stood alone, it wouldn’t have the same effect.” (See table on p. 35 for examples of topics covered in demonstration classrooms.)

## 3 Beginning teachers want to know they are not alone.

Beginning teachers need to know they are not alone in their thinking about how to create more equitable educational experiences and outcomes for students and in their desire to push the

difficult conversations tied to equity.

Several teachers said they felt that they were viewed as new professionals who had been indoctrinated by their education programs and filled with ideas that were met with skepticism and cynicism by veteran staff. One beginning teacher describes this as being told he was “pouring old wine into new bottles” and that his work was “nothing to get excited about.”

One teacher who was involved in an equity-focused school initiative said he felt that his thinking was valued in his school site. However, outside of that initiative, he said he felt that people tuned out of these conversations.

Teachers with administrators who supported culturally responsive and relevant pedagogy work and the challenging conversations about equity felt more at ease. One teacher noted, “The principal at my school is very interested. She was pushing it. And I think that was important that she knew this work needs to be done at our school.” Another said, “The principal felt the need to give a voice there (to these issues), and I was happy for that.”

Many of these teachers say that, with administrative support, they believe they could be leaders in educational equity who can share and show others that culturally responsive and relevant pedagogy is possible. They want to share what they have learned — and are eager to do so, formally and informally.

One teacher said, “A lot of teachers and parents come in saying, ‘Why are you telling our kids that it’s OK if they have two moms or two dads?’ We need to speak about it. And teachers don’t know about these policies ... haven’t read them or are unaware.”

## 4 Beginning teachers need mentors who can talk about these issues.

Beginning teachers need mentors who know about and want to talk about the challenging issues tied to equity work in schools.

Teachers noted that the mentor relationship is strongest when they share similar pedagogy and thinking. Some pointed out the value of having mentors participate in the same professional learning in equity concerns as beginning teachers to ensure continuity and synchronicity of learning and practice.

Creating opportunities for combined professional learning for mentors and mentees allows for conversations and shared understandings of issues tied to equity.

Identifying mentors who already demonstrate equitable classroom practices provides additional support for the beginning teacher.

For example, many of the host teachers who opened their classrooms for observation also took on an informal mentoring role with the visiting teachers. These relationships created significant professional support for novice teachers wanting to continue the conversation and try new things based on this pedagogical focus.

## CREATING CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE AND RELEVANT CLASSROOM SPACES

### Session 1

- Explore issues of equity in education and related policies in Ontario.
- Deepen collective understanding of culturally responsive and relevant pedagogy theory, highlighting the three tenets of high expectations, cultural competence, and critical consciousness.
- Investigate social identity and position.
- Discuss connections to culturally responsive and relevant pedagogy within the school.

### Session 2

- Explore examples of how other teachers have taken on the work of culturally responsive and relevant pedagogy.
- Deconstruct lessons for bias as a catalyst for exploring curriculum.
- Begin to explore the equity continuum and the possibilities for classroom inquiry.

### Session 3

- Identify questions for further inquiry and plot practices within selected tenets of the equity continuum.
- Work in grade-level teams to identify areas for curriculum development.

### Session 4

- Visit a demonstration classroom.
- Meet with the teacher to familiarize self with teacher and lesson.
- Engage in focused observation of practice.
- Participate in post-observation with teacher to analyze lesson, ask questions, solidify learning.

### Session 5

- Reflect and consolidate learning from classroom visits.
- Identify next steps for classroom practice.
- Build a support network of other like-minded colleagues.

## 5 Beginning teachers need leaders who care about this work.

Beginning teachers need to know this work matters to the leaders where they work — that they are accountable to it.

Teachers in the project expressed a strong need to be pro-

vided time and assurance that it is OK to be intentional about equity issues, even with all the other details and tasks that crowd a teacher's daily routine. As one teacher said, "You lose track sometimes because you are on the treadmill of work ... but these are students' lives, and it's our responsibility. You can never be reminded too much of that."

### MAKING AN IMPACT

Professional learning increases the chances that the equity-focused work is incorporated and monitored by giving beginning teachers multiple entry points to explore these issues in a systematic way (Murray & West-Burns, 2011). The teachers who participated in professional learning on culturally responsive and relevant pedagogy became leaders in their own right. Many of these new teachers became members of equity committees in their schools, began co-facilitating with professional learning teams, initiated conversations in their school sites about equity policy, and actively sought to redefine curriculum and share these experiences with their colleagues and school communities. The professional learning series served as a catalyst in some cases for teachers to seek more knowledge in areas related to the topics they had begun to explore.

While participating teachers were overwhelmingly positive about the professional learning, they also noted these critical factors for their success: time and space for tough conversations, a model of learning that includes theory and application, a sense that they are not alone, mentors equipped to guide them, and administrative support. With these components, emerging leaders in equity education have the potential for the greatest impact on student outcomes.

### REFERENCES

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Nicole West-Burns ([nicole.west.burns@utoronto.ca](mailto:nicole.west.burns@utoronto.ca)) is director of school services for the Centre for Urban Schooling at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto. Karen Murray ([karen.murray@tdsb.on.ca](mailto:karen.murray@tdsb.on.ca)) is program co-ordinator for beginning teachers and Jennifer Watt ([jennifer.watt@ontario.ca](mailto:jennifer.watt@ontario.ca)) is instruction leader for beginning teachers in the Toronto District School Board. ■

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