

AN OPPORTUNITY FOR EQUITY

PANDEMIC SHINES A LIGHT ON THE NEED FOR EQUITABLE TEACHING PRACTICES

BY SONIA CAUS GLEASON AND JILL HARRISON BERG

When COVID-19 appeared on international radar this year and began its march around the globe, it revealed to any who might have previously denied it that the work to eliminate educational inequities is far from done.

During this pandemic, some students have uninterrupted access to the basic needs of daily life and remote learning requirements such as devices, internet, and a supportive learning environment, while others do not. This pattern is not random; it can be predicted by demographics, including race, income level, and ZIP code, that continue to be shaped by institutional

and structural racism.

Since the first enslaved Africans were brought to the North American continent 400 years ago, a chain of events has created a deep foundation for inequities that are still felt in the United States today (Hannah-Jones & Elliott, 2019). Long-established systems, practices, and beliefs perpetuate — in ways we might not realize — the fallacy that black and brown people have less value and deserve less than those of European descent. Though strides have been made, the work to eliminate inequities is far from done.

During this pandemic, more than ever, many educators are keeping these inequities top of mind. Rather than move online with what we have always

done, we are seeking out professional learning to help us push our practices toward greater instructional equity.

AN UNEXPECTED OPENING

Crisis shines an unflinching light on inequity. As educators working with students of color and the economically poor know, their students' families disproportionately represent essential workers, and thus are more likely to be exposed to COVID-19 as they keep the rest of the country able to shelter in place (Rho et al., 2020).

Further, historical factors make it more likely that these families have preconditions that increase the risk of sickness and death from this virus (Brooks, 2020; Centers for Disease



Control and Prevention, 2020).

In addition, policies and practices with racism and classism baked into them have lowered opportunities for decent food, housing, health care, and employment (Hanks et al., 2018). And the public education system continues to have laws, policies, and structures that exclude and limit students because of race, class, language, and special needs.

Galvanized by the ugly reality of these inequities during the pandemic, and recognizing that what they can offer right now is not all that is needed, educators remain committed to students and their learning.

Many are ready to disrupt old patterns and seek ways to double down on instructional equity. They recognize that what seemed to work for most of their students was not good

enough. They are looking to establish new routines that can ensure their instruction meets each student's needs.

For example, teachers are wondering: In what ways are my relationships with families opportunities for me to deepen my knowledge of students as people and as learners? How can I create deeper learning experiences that leverage students' own learning environments? How can I expand my instructional repertoire to provide more choices so that students can learn to become effective and independent learners?

At the moment, professional learning efforts to address these questions are uneven, as a result of a range of district planning efforts and resources, wide variation in educators' trust and collaboration, and inconsistent levels of attention to systematic access. Furthermore,

not all social forces within and across communities are unified in an equity commitment.

But many educators are not waiting for school-based professional learning or district workshops to answer their burning questions and address their students' urgent needs.

Educators have quickly organized to teach themselves — individually and collectively — how to take their teaching and learning to a higher level while unable to connect face to face. They are looking to colleagues, national organizations, webinars, articles, and social media, as well as to families and students to establish new student-centered teaching practices.

In doing so, they have lifted their heads, looked beyond their schools, and opened their eyes to a world of new ways to know their students and engage them

as active learners. Keeping equity at the center requires just this kind of collective effort and an intentionality about changing practices. Education will not become more equitable incidentally.

We see three types of practices emerging as starting places for this work: knowing students and families, inquiry-based teaching, and expanding student agency and choices.

KNOWING STUDENTS AND FAMILIES

Effective teaching starts with knowledge of students (NBPTS, 2016). Teachers have traditionally engaged with families in student conferences, school events, and possibly even home visits to deepen their knowledge of students. Now this pandemic has closed these doors but opened new channels of communication.

Many educators are taking closer note of families' preferred forms of connection (e.g. email, phone, text), reaching out to talk with families about their needs, partnering with them to design solutions, and using what they learn to inform their efforts to help students learn and help their families navigate these complicated days.

If we're paying attention, we see that this is a new way of learning about the true personalities, living situations, family dynamics, sources of background knowledge, and other individual differences of our students — crucial information to support them effectively. For example, we may discover that there are many family members beyond our primary contact who can be a part of a student support plan, even if remotely by phone. With a commitment to equity, we are driven to seek out ways to use what we learn from families as assets for each student's well-being.

In addition, since colleagues cannot connect in hallways throughout the school day, many schools are developing new routines for logging these exchanges and sharing new knowledge about students with all the adults serving each child.

Equity-minded teams are examining these logs, looking for patterns by race,

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home language, and economic status, and helping each other to question how their own unexamined biases may be adversely affecting their communication, how the school's traditions may have created cultural barriers, or how historical factors might have led to unexamined structural barriers that could now be examined in light of new family communication data.

INQUIRY-BASED TEACHING

The learning environment is an essential factor of the learning and teaching equation. That's why educators invest significant time, energy, money, and thought into creating classrooms that tap into students' interests, build on their prior knowledge, affirm their identities, support them to become independent learners, and help them establish effective work habits. But as a result of the pandemic, suddenly we have a lot less control over the physical environment that surrounds our students.

This may feel like a loss but also can be an opportunity to focus on learning goals. As we are forced to pull the learning goals into the foreground and push the learning context into the background, we begin to recognize many paths to those goals, paths to suit each student. At the same time, we are seeking out new (often virtual) environments and looking with fresh eyes at the environments to which students do have access.

Communities of practice that have already formed around alternative forms of student inquiry, such as project-based learning, place-based learning, and experiential learning, are getting fresh attention. Educators are

exploring online resources, including webinars, articles, and websites that can help them learn to structure paths of inquiry in which students explore and demonstrate mastery of specific standards while drawing on nontraditional learning environments.

Museums, zoos, science labs, and many other institutions have opened their virtual doors, providing unlimited playgrounds for such inquiry-based learning. An equity lens reminds us to also invite students to mine their own homes as rich learning environments. In this way, we don't inadvertently devalue students' homes by always directing them to look beyond them.

EXPANDING STUDENT AGENCY AND CHOICES

Remote learning also offers an opportunity to give students more choice — and to support them in learning to become effective decision-makers and independent learners. In fact, some teachers are reporting increases in student engagement with remote learning, as they are thinking outside of the traditional structure of classes and making learning more accessible to more students, including those who previously had lower levels of school attendance and engagement.

What is engaging to one student may not be engaging to another, and students learn best in different ways. Students working in their own spaces and at their own paces can be provided with a wider array of choices for engagement with course material, and teachers can think in new ways about balancing individual learning with that which happens in small and large groups. The only limitation is teachers' own repertoires.

For this, during the pandemic, teachers are increasingly collaborating with colleagues on social media. They have not only created new virtual gathering places, from Facebook groups to Twitter chats to Pinterest boards, but they have made themselves vulnerable by posting urgent questions, offered themselves up to each other

for collaborative problem-solving, and generously shared tools of their own design for others to critically review and adapt for their own use.

To be sure, a critical eye is needed, as content available on social media varies widely in quality. However, discerning educators are learning to use educator-created content to hone their skills for asking critical questions and expanding their ideas about what instructional moves are needed to help each student learn.

In fact, many educators are sharing their learning with school and district colleagues and inviting them to join the collaboration. Where there is a history of collaborative professional learning, teachers are experimenting with numerous new teaching and learning resources, expanding their tool kits, and equipping themselves to offer their students a more diverse array of student choices.

CHANGING OUR BELIEFS, PRACTICES, AND SYSTEMS

In a previous article for *The Learning Professional* (Berg & Gleason, 2018), we wrote about three dimensions of equity that need to evolve in concert:

- Our **beliefs**: mindsets, biases, expectations;
- Our **actions**: professional practices and routines; and
- Our **systems**: policies and structures.

This pandemic is an important time to revisit these dimensions, because as we make necessary changes to practice, this prompts us to re-examine our beliefs and our systems.

It's a time to ask: How might our beliefs empower us or hold us back from seizing this as an opportunity to make the kind of changes students really need? What systems changes might be called for, as we shift our practices? What systems don't exist, and which bump up against efforts to advance equity?

Working deliberately to change all three interrelated dimensions is essential

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for students of every race, gender, language, and special need to experience equitable and high-quality learning. Over time, educators can build momentum and help public education make good on its promise to educate all students with equity and excellence.

EMBRACE OPPORTUNITY

While the three practices described here are worthy of attention in our professional learning plans in any school year, they stand out during the pandemic as entry points to increasing instructional equity in the longer term. At a time when our nation experiences the reality of stark inequities we have built into our democracy at every level, these practices stand out as the kind of changes that can be catalysts for larger changes to our beliefs, our systems, and to other practices.

In this way, painful realizations we're making about society today can propel us to deepen our learning about what's needed and respond with deliberate attention to how our beliefs, practices, and systems need to change. As we do this work and build on it together with purpose, we can reframe the beliefs, practices, and systems in a way that ensures each child is able to learn and thrive. More than ever, we know we need to — for all of us.

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Sonia Caus Gleason (sonia@soniacausgleason.org) consults and coaches on collaborative adult learning and measurement efforts that pursue equity, innovation, and continuous improvement. Jill Harrison Berg (jhberg@gmail.com) is a leadership coach, researcher, and consultant on teacher leadership and systemic improvement. ■