

Why Classroom Equity Strategies Aren't Always EQUAL

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Certain instructional techniques, like the use of equity sticks, can create new discrepancies if used too rigidly.

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Teachers continually make decisions, big and small, that can advance or impede equitable opportunities for students, regardless of intention.

This is evident in teachers' choices about whom to call on when and who gets to engage with challenging content.

Equity is not separate from teachers' daily instructional work. It is woven throughout everything teachers do. Through teachers' moment-to-moment decisions, students are continually—and often visibly—positioned with respect to one another (e.g., as more or less capable than others) and in relation to the academic content (e.g., “good” at math, a “struggling” reader) in ways that can affect their experiences as learners and as human beings.



Rigid equity strategies can signal that what is valued by the teacher is adherence to procedures and processes.



Classroom discussion is a ripe space to examine the complex and intertwined nature of equity and teaching practice. Skillfully led discussions create opportunities for students to collectively engage in sense-making around rich content, to attend thoughtfully to the perspectives of others, and to support one another sensitively and productively to reach a common goal. When managed skillfully, classroom discussion can be a vehicle for positioning all children as capable and competent.

Nevertheless, there is considerable potential for inequity in discussions. Students' voices can be sidelined. A wide range of strengths among children may not be acknowledged or valued by the teacher or other students. Students may be given unequal opportunities to engage with the content. Narrow ideas about what is "right" or "correct" may be reinforced.

Knowing how to attend to equity when leading discussions—and indeed when carrying out many teaching tasks—is not easy, even for veteran teachers. One way many teachers navigate these complexities is by using instructional equity strategies. These are ready-made systems or tools designed to help teachers mitigate biases and ensure more equitable experiences for children. Examples include techniques for calling on children, for delegating responsibilities in the classroom, or for scaffolding students' thinking.

However, while such equity strategies can be an important starting place, they can also exacerbate problems in the classroom and create new ones, particularly for children already marginalized by schools due to race, ethnicity, gender, ability, or other identity affiliations. Let's look at one example to see how equity strategies can

both mitigate and, if not used with discretion, create issues of equity.

When Calling-On Strategies Go Wrong

Many teachers promote equity in the classroom through participation and calling-on strategies, such as the use of equity sticks, where teachers randomly pull popsicle sticks with children's names to ensure students have an equal chance to participate and to randomize how children participate. Yet, as the following vignette illustrates, such strategies can also create equity concerns when not used thoughtfully.

"Let's see, let's see, who's it gonna be," the teacher says in a sing-song voice, shaking a can full of popsicle sticks. She reaches in and triumphantly pulls one out.

"Nina! You're up. Your turn to share a 'big idea.' What do you think is the theme of the book?"

Nina says, "I think it has to do with how you can't just make quick decisions about people, you have to look deeper."

"OK great. And thank you, Nina, for being ready."

The teacher shakes her can and pulls out a new name. "Marcus, your turn. You get to give us 'evidence' this time. Can you think of an example from the book that supports what Nina just said?"

Marcus hesitates. "I actually was thinking something different? About the theme? Is that OK to say now? It connects a little and is also a little different."

The teacher shakes her head. "No, Marcus. Hold onto that thought. Your job is to give positive evidence for Nina's idea, not to share your own."

Marcus ducks his head and shrugs. “I am not really sure about that one, I guess,” he says.

“Hmm, Marcus,” says the teacher. “I want you to keep thinking about it and I will pull another name. It’s important for you to be ready next time I call. You never know when I will pull your name!”

Randomized calling-on strategies like this can be an important part of a toolkit for teachers to elicit a range of voices during discussion and to manage their own biases. Research shows that teachers’ decisions can be influenced by their own experiences and identities and by their beliefs about students’ capabilities given their race, gender, ethnicity, and other identity affiliations (Sleeter, 2008). This is particularly relevant for how teachers manage participation, recognize children’s competence, or assign cognitively demanding tasks. For example, it is common for teachers, who are predominantly white, to overlook the voices of students of color or engage with them in less cognitively demanding ways (Kohli, 2008; Kurth, Anderson, & Palincsar, 2002). Such randomized strategies can also diversify the type of participation that students are asked to engage in. This helps ensure that teachers’ assumptions and biases do not impact which students have an opportunity to engage with cognitively demanding questions. When it was Nina’s turn, for example, she was required to share a “big idea,” and Marcus’s turn was that of “evidence.”

Yet equity sticks and other such structures must be used with careful judgment and with attention to context and learner, or they can exacerbate, rather than mitigate, inequity. Let’s return to the vignette to unpack *when* the strategy was used, to *what end*, and with *whom* as a way of examining these nuances:

When: We cannot know for sure, but the teacher may not have called on either Nina or Marcus without the popsicle sticks. The sticks, therefore, may have created a space for Nina and Marcus to share. But the sticks protocol

this teacher used also limited the timing and opportunity of their talk. Nina had to share something new; she couldn’t comment on an idea previously voiced by another child. Marcus was only allowed to give evidence for Nina’s contribution; he was not allowed to disagree or extend Nina’s idea, and he couldn’t share something new. While it created space for Marcus to contribute, this calling-on strategy also boxed him in. This was a lost opportunity for Marcus and



the class, for Marcus’s idea might have moved the discussion forward in more productive ways.

Why and to what end: By tightly following the protocol of equity sticks in terms of who talked, when, and about what, the teacher did not allow the discussion to build naturally and fluidly. The structure and flow were dictated by the system, rather than by the content or quality of ideas shared. Students may have walked away with the idea that the content of their talk and the ways they listened and responded to one another’s ideas mattered much less than whether they followed the rules and procedures for *when* to talk. The use of equity sticks in this manner reduces the cognitive demand of the discussion, inhibits students’ learning, and reinforces problematic ideas about the broader purposes of discussion.

With whom: Calling-on systems can help teachers mitigate the influence of their biases when deciding whose ideas to elicit and when to elicit them. But these systems also make it difficult for students to contribute with their strengths and feel smart and capable in front of peers. Calling-on systems can also introduce problematic power dynamics. What if, for example, Nina was a white girl with “higher status” in the class, and Marcus was a Black boy who, across his schooling experience, had been marginalized by teachers and given less



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opportunity? The teacher would have exacerbated this unjust power dynamic by forcing Marcus to respond only to Nina’s idea rather than allowing him to share his own thinking, further dampening Marcus’s faith in himself. In addition, the teacher’s critique that Marcus was “not ready”—even though he was actively tracking the discussion and prepared to contribute—could have caused other students to develop false, negative conceptions of Marcus’s competence, and possibly about the brilliance of Black boys more generally.

Randomized calling-on strategies and other equity strategies can support teachers in avoiding bias and ensuring a diverse group of students contribute in rich ways. But just because such strategies help children have *equal* opportunity, it does not mean that they are *equitable*. For another example, consider sentence stems that can scaffold children’s use of language to respond to one another during activities like discussion. While sentence stems can be useful, especially for English learners who need language support,

sentence stems have been used pejoratively with Black children to make sure they use white dominant language structures when speaking and to create opportunities for chastisement and correction when they fail to do so, regardless of the content of their ideas. Or take the example of a teacher using small group work structured so all students in the group have a specified role. Small group work can be an effective way to support participation and give all students an opportunity to be heard, and roles during small groups can ensure that every group member has an active part in the work. However, if a teacher does not attend to how roles are getting assigned, marginalized students may find themselves repeatedly in roles that don’t honor their contributions or provide important learning opportunities.

Across such illustrations, we see that when one-size-fits-all equity strategies are allowed to take over discussion or other classroom procedures, rather than support them, they can reinforce, rather than disrupt, negative ideas about students. Rigid equity strategies can signal that what is valued by the teacher is adherence to procedures and processes. Children receive recognition not for engaging deeply with the content, but for following the rules and speaking in particular (dominant) ways.

Be Adaptive, Not Rigid

When using equity strategies, teachers should do so adaptively. They should identify what they might be communicating to children through *when*, *why*, and *with whom* the strategies are used, and then use those reflections to apply the strategies more flexibly and responsively based on students and context. But what might that look like?

What if, believing Nina’s idea was valuable, the teacher had said something like, “Let’s pause here,” and then opened the discussion *beyond* the regimented, planned structure? What if she had given students an opportunity to journal, turn and talk, or otherwise reflect on Nina’s contribution? And what if, during that exercise,

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the teacher actively noticed Marcus had something valuable to share about the big idea? She could then have recognized Marcus's competence by actively calling on him in that moment—or even by simply asking permission to share his idea herself. She could then also have lingered to open up both Nina and Marcus's ideas to the whole group and invite comment and content-rich discussion. This would have allowed her to flag both Nina's and Marcus's thinking as important, emphasize good content-specific practices (such as providing evidence) with the broader group, and make space for collective meaning-making—without sacrificing the benefits of randomization.

Similarly, what if the teacher had relaxed her calling-on system briefly to let Marcus share his thinking generally, perhaps requesting only that he also make a connection to Nina's point? By doing so, the teacher would have welcomed a new perspective into the discussion that may have enriched it in new, surprising ways. Additionally, she would have accounted responsively for what it might mean to shut down Marcus's thinking, and for the related equity implications for him and the class.

Make Sure “Equal” Is Also “Equitable”

Strategies like equity sticks or sentence stems are not innately bad. They are valuable aids for teachers to have in their repertoire. However, when used without considering how they can potentially restrict the free flow of ideas or students' interactions with the content or context of the class, these strategies can also create new inequities. This impacts all students, and especially children who might already be marginalized in other ways by teachers or peers because of their identities. To advance equity in broad ways, teachers must be sure to use these

strategies responsively and adaptively, so they have the power to create opportunities for not just equality, but also for equity during discussion and beyond. 

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Reflect & Discuss

Are there any equity strategies that you tried that did not go as planned?
What did you do in response?

What other ways might the teacher in the example have steered the discussion to be more equitable and flexible?

Can you think of any other classroom equity strategies that might have unintended consequences?

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