



Ways Teachers Can Challenge Inequality in the Classroom

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It's no secret that inequality in the classroom is a huge issue in American schools. With a simple Google search, anyone can find countless studies that focus on the many ways our students are treated unfairly, especially when compared to those in other countries. Unfortunately, the problem runs the gamut from racial disparities and socioeconomic status, to gender inequality, and everything in between.

For teachers, it's just another challenge to fight back against when it comes to planning classroom routines and curriculum. It can be argued that individual educators don't have a whole lot of control over the situation because factors stemmed from income inequality and school funding are fundamental societal issues.

But believe it or not, there are many ways a teacher can reduce the level of inequity in schools by focusing on any potential inequality in their own classrooms.

Inequity Versus Inequality: What's the Difference?

To go any further, it's necessary to discuss in depth the difference between these commonly misunderstood and confused words. When it comes to equity and inequity, we are talking about words that refer to the injustice or unfairness that exists within school policies or classroom procedures.

For example, [research](#) recognizes that students who are from low-income families often have unequal opportunities for education, often being forced to attend underfunded schools without the same number and quality of resources compared to other schools. The outrage that we feel when we understand these facts is the inequity or unfairness of the situation occurring.

Inequality, on the other hand, refers to only the imbalance that exists in classrooms, without the connotation of unfairness or injustice. An example of inequality would simply be the data that shows that many schools in low-income areas are underfunded, as this illustrates the imbalance between funding of high- and low-income schools. The realization that this is unfair is where equity comes into play. Once we understand the difference a conversation is possible about how to fix issues that occur in the classroom at the micro level.

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Strategies to Challenge Inequality in the Classroom



As mentioned above, inequality in the classroom comes in many forms, most of which are due to old teaching practices that have been passed down for ages. Let's take a closer look at what these are, and how to fix it in your classroom.

Prioritize Relationships with All Students

Arguably, one of the most important aspects of teaching is building positive relationships with kids so they feel safe in the classroom and cared about by adults. Think about it this way: nobody likes to be treated differently because of the color of their skin, their ability or intelligence level, gender, or interests. Indeed, many students have grown up thinking that some teachers simply did not like them, or that they at least liked others more because of a factor outside of their control.

Keep this issue out of the classroom by making it a priority to forge a positive relationship with all students, setting personal feelings aside. Work to make all feel seen, heard, and understood.

Check Yourself and Model Acceptance and Tolerance

Whether we like to admit it or not, everyone has their own prejudices to dispel. This very human trait is one that we all need to contend with, so the best place to start is with looking inward at ourselves. Sometimes we use common colloquialisms like, "boys will

be boys”. With this as an example, when thinking about this saying more deeply, we can see that such a popular phrase can actually be used as a double standard to enable boys to get away with certain negative behaviors, while no such phrase exists for girls. Such an innocent-seeming phrase can actually promote gender bias.

This means that all educators should reevaluate what they say and do in the classroom. Do you call on certain students more often because you know they will likely know the answer? Do you use gender neutral language to address everyone, instead referring to the whole group as “you guys”? Think deeply and set up the classroom so that all kids can participate equally, and model acceptance and tolerance in words and body language.



Watch on [YouTube](#)

Ensure Lessons Embrace and Teach Diversity

Teachers often don’t have the ability to choose their own curriculum, as this is handed down by the larger district and are governed by state or Common Core standards. Even so, instructors do have the ability to customize lessons for their classes. No matter the demographic teachers serve, all lessons should embrace diversity and normalize different cultures and customs.

And don’t merely limit this to just social studies lessons! Represent and support children by providing diverse names in math word problems and choose class readings that promote cultural awareness. For each subject across the curriculum, carefully choose the materials to be used so that all students feel seen.

Reevaluate Grouping Strategies and Tracking



For many years, tracking has been a gold standard in education, especially when it comes to middle and high school students. Tracking is essentially ability grouping that is done on a larger scale, and often places children who perform at similar levels into “houses” or “pods”. At the elementary level, it looks more like placing kids into ability groups for certain subjects, like reading or math.

While this might seem like a great idea because it places kids into manageable groups that the teacher can help at their level, imagine being a student who was placed in the lowest ability group. This practice can be humiliating for students who realize more than we think! It also reinforces the idea that some learners are “smart” and others are “dumb”, discouraging children at all levels from achieving more than they believe they can or should.

Lastly, when placed into ability groups, students are unable to learn from others outside their own grouping. Kids can learn a lot more from peers who are ahead, and all children should learn to work with each other because nobody is the same, and that’s okay.

Teachers can fight back against this common teaching practice by varying their grouping strategies throughout the school year, using different models for units and projects as they see fit. Allow all students to learn from one other to create a more equal experience.

Avoid the Classroom Behavior Clip Chart

Think about the business world. When adults gather for a meeting, if someone talks out of turn or becomes unfocused, does the boss turn around and write the name of that person on a white board with a frowny face? Of course not! This form of shaming would never occur in the adult world yet happens all the time in the form of behavior clip charts in elementary classrooms across the country. If adults would never treat each other in this humiliating way, why would anyone want to do this to kids?

Many teachers still turn to behavioral charts or color-coded discipline systems to “teach” kids how to act in class. While students do need to learn how to behave in a group setting, it can be done in a way that doesn’t disproportionately shame and embarrass them amongst their peers. Doing so can make kids feel like they are inherently “bad”, while others who don’t get “into trouble” are “good” or “well behaved”. Avoid using whole-class behavioral systems such as those described above. Instead, focus on positive reinforcement like token systems.

Use Assessments to Gain Insight, Not Punish

Assessments should be used to help teachers measure growth and plan for reteaching, but society puts a lot of stock into letter grades, which can be used to penalize children who don’t perform as high. Instead of utilizing tests as the high-stakes summative assessments, [incorporate formative assessment](#) into your unit to measure growth in an authentic way, to ensure that all students feel worthy and not diminished by their grades.

As you can see, it’s possible to lessen the inequity in schools by focusing on the inequalities kids face in the classroom at the local level. Use the tips above to enhance your teaching and grow as an educator. In the meantime, turn to Kids Academy for the highest quality learning resources like games, [printable worksheets](#), and apps to supplement your lessons with exciting and equitable content!

