Who Participates? Making Equity Work in Classrooms Actionable

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Who Participates? Making Equity Concrete in Classrooms

Jack was a White man and veteran high school science teacher. He had coached football at his school for over twenty years. Anyone who talked with Jack for a few minutes could tell he cared about students and was committed to constantly improving as a teacher. But when we first met him, equity hadn't been central to his practice. Like so many teachers, he acknowledged that racism, sexism and other forms of oppression were still problems in society, but he wasn't sure how they might be playing out in his classroom.

Over the course of that school year, we supported Jack in collecting data and reflecting on equity patterns in his own classroom. We focused on who among his students was and wasn't getting opportunities to participate in class discussions. Our goal was to identify inequities and deploy instructional changes to mitigate them.

Midway through the school year, we started to notice something. Jack was asking new kinds of questions related to equity and new questions of himself as a teacher. In one of our data reflection sessions, Jack said, "I've asked myself that question. I've asked myself: am I biased towards Caucasians, Hispanics, or African Americans? It's easy for me to say I'm not. But sometimes it can come through in such subtle kinds of ways."

This surprised us. Early in our collaboration, Jack often explained inequities in terms of his students' personalities or perceived deficits. But here he was looking at himself and his own potential biases. How did this happen and why?

Bias at the Classroom Level

Bias operates at multiple levels and settings of social life, often in implicit forms (Staats, Capatosto, Tenney, & Mamo, 2017). In education, school leaders have known for years about biases in curriculum, discipline, and course placement. Teachers alone didn't create biases

against Black girls, emergent multilingual students, Indigenous communities, and other minoritized groups. But these biases often do influence what teachers do in classrooms. As Khalifa (2018) writes, “oppression is not always intentional and at the forefront of the minds of educators. Oppression is historical, yet its structures continue to shape the lives of minoritized people. It is reproductive, and requires little effort to reproduce” (p. 18).

A crucial site of bias in classrooms is class discussions. Teachers must decide who they call on (and who they don’t), and also the quality of participation opportunities they make available to different students. Despite teachers’ good intentions, amidst the complex and fast-paced work of teaching, biases can take over. Research shows that teachers tend to privilege participation from students who look like them, talk like them, and produce knowledge like them. This matters because participation in classroom discourse has a significant impact on student learning. When teachers aren’t purposeful about who gets to participate and how, minoritized students usually end up with fewer learning opportunities.

Fortunately, this is also a place where anti-bias work can be made concrete. Although educational inequity can feel overwhelming, this is one area where teachers can feel more control. They can exercise their discretionary authority to produce fairness for minoritized students (Ball, 2018). The challenge for school leaders is to put in place structures and resources to support teachers in anti-bias work at the classroom level.

Of course, the issue of teacher bias in classrooms can’t substitute for attention to policies and practices that perpetuate structural oppression. For example, the anti-Black biases that so many students experience daily in classrooms are fueled by anti-Black narratives about intelligence, motivation, and other traits. But those same racist narratives also helped build the policies and practices of chattel slavery, Jim Crow, mass incarceration, and other White

supremacist systems. So in our work with teachers, we think of a problem like inequitably distributed participation opportunities as one way that histories of oppressive ideas and structures play out in local classroom interaction.

Inequity doesn't happen by itself. Inequity is made by people, through policies they set and how they choose to interact with minoritized people from moment to moment.

Avoiding the "Inoculation Model"

A common way that school leaders support teachers in this work is through anti-bias workshops. The main purpose of such workshops is usually to make people aware of the science behind implicit bias. We refer to this approach as the "inoculation model." The underlying assumption here is that when people realize that they *can* be biased, that they will become immune from actually *being* biased. What research tells us, though, is that biases are sticky and difficult to change. This means that one-time or even multiple trainings focused on information delivery are unlikely to change actual teaching practice.

What teachers need is support in actively monitoring how their biases are affecting students in real-time. Some teachers have taken an Implicit Association Test (IAT), which can illuminate potential biases related to race, gender, and other social markers. Although it's useful for a teacher to know they might generally associate math ability with boys rather than girls, for example, an IAT can't tell a teacher how that bias actually shows up in the classroom.

As a first step, teachers need access to data on potential biases connected to the everyday work of teaching, such as participation patterns in class discussions. It's one thing to know that Black boys don't get a fair chance at academic success, but it's another to see how *you* might be marginalizing Black boys in your own classroom. Data can help make inequity a tangible, local problem. Of course, as school leaders know, data alone doesn't drive instructional change. Next,

we describe a tool called EQUIP, which generates data on classroom-level bias, and also discuss our broader approach for supporting communities of teachers to build relationships and leverage that data to amplify equity.

The EQUIP Tool & Professional Development Approach

EQUIP (https://www.equip.ninja/) is a free, research-based classroom observation tool designed to empower teachers with quantitative data on equity patterns in classroom interaction (Reinholz & Shah, 2018). EQUIP, which stands for "**E**quity **QU**antified **I**n **P**articipation," focuses on equity in terms of participation: students' actual participation and students' opportunities to participate in the learning process. EQUIP analyzes how discourse opportunities—both their quantity and quality—get distributed in a classroom, broken down by social markers and by individual students.

EQUIP is customizable, so it can be tailored to specific school and community contexts. This happens in two ways. First, teachers decide which aspects of classroom discourse they think matter for learning (e.g., cognitive demand of teacher questions, length of student responses). Second, teachers input the social markers along which they want to disaggregate classroom discourse. EQUIP produces data visualizations that make it easier for teachers to see, for example, whether one or two students are dominating a class discussion, or whether girls mostly get opportunities to make factual contributions, rather than rich scientific explanations (see Figures 1 and 2).

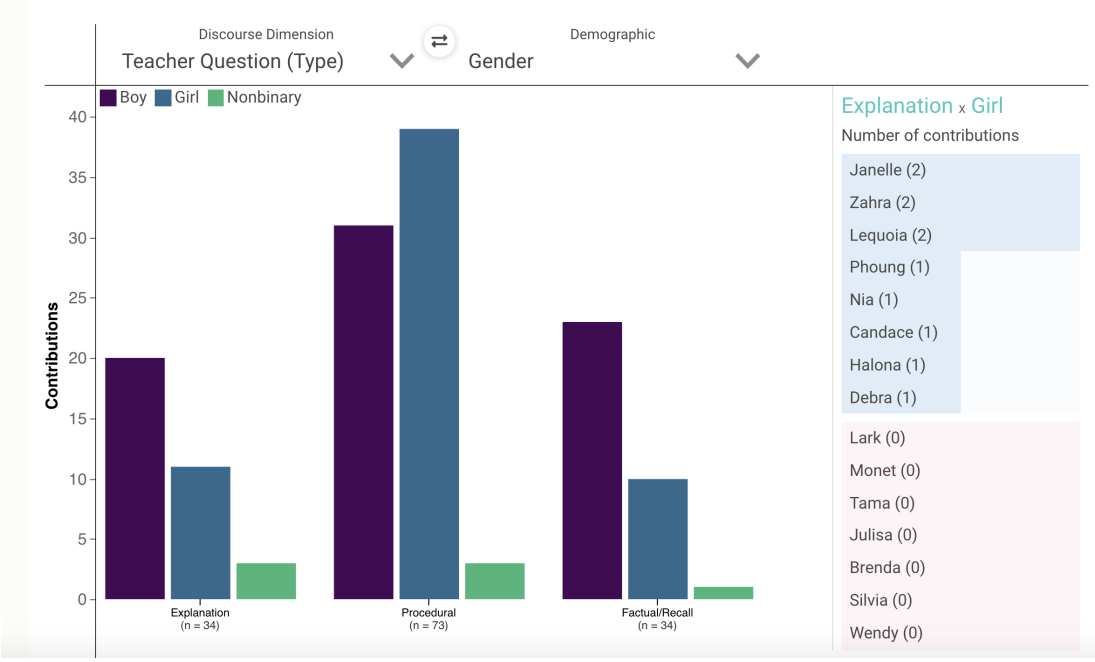

Figure 1. Sample EQUIP graph: type of teacher question distributed by gender categories.

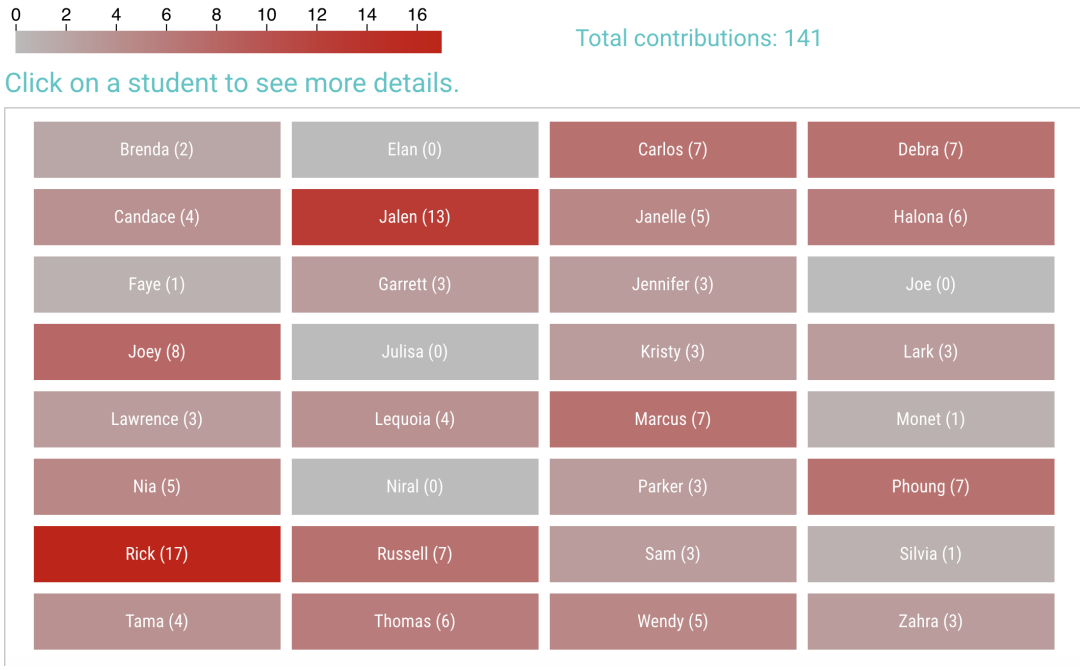

Figure 2. Sample EQUIP graph: heatmap showing individual student participation.

Disaggregating participation patterns by social markers is critically important. Slogans like “algebra for all,” “literacy for all,” and “science for all” are common in education. But to actually realize those equity visions, it helps to specify the *all* in “for all.” Too often educators pursue a generic version of “equity,” rather than *racial* equity or *disability* equity or *linguistic* equity. Naming what happens in classrooms in terms of social markers can help teachers avoid common obstacles like color-evasiveness, which obstruct the pursuit of all kinds of equity in classrooms (Martin, 2003). The design of EQUIP supports this type of targeted equity work.

Typically, teachers use EQUIP on video recordings of lessons they’ve taught, or they have a coach or colleague use EQUIP in real-time as they watch them teach. EQUIP itself does not audio or video record classrooms. When a student participates, the observer codes that moment of participation in the EQUIP web app. Over time, hundreds of moments of participation accrue, which can then be analyzed through the multiple data visualizations available in EQUIP.

Importantly, these quantitative data are best used in concert with qualitative data on equity and inequity, including minoritized students’ subjective experiences in classrooms. Even though EQUIP analytics may indicate equity, students must also feel that they have fair opportunities to participate. Equity can never be reduced to a collection of statistics. EQUIP data can provide an anchor that allows teachers to dive deeper into equity work.

Based on our work with teachers, we have developed an approach to professional development using EQUIP. Here we offer three principles that inform our approach: 1) make anti-bias work local; 2) interpret data and set equity goals in historical context; and 3) collaborate and iterate with colleagues. To illustrate these principles, we draw on examples from our work with teachers in STEM education.

Make Anti-bias Work Local

Inequities can differ in form and root cause from district to district and school to school. Anti-bias work in a racially diverse suburban district will differ from similar efforts in an all-White rural district. A key question to ask is: *what kinds of hierarchies are present at your school and in your classroom?* This helps teachers think about inequity and bias in terms of locally relevant social markers.

Many educators we work with are curious about inequities related to race and gender, although the specific racial and gender categories they track vary based on student demographics in their classrooms. For example, one school leader of an all-Black school who was thinking about using EQUIP pointed out that using traditional racial categories didn't make sense in his context. Instead, this opened discussions of colorism, and how EQUIP might be used to identify potential biases that favor lighter-skinned students.

Another example is a physics teacher who taught at a Catholic school and had only White boys in one of his classes. In reflecting on local hierarchies in his community, he realized that there was a longstanding false narrative about non-Catholic students being less academically prepared and less competent than Catholic students. This prompted him to customize EQUIP to help him identify potential biases related to religious affiliation.

The key idea is that when we make anti-bias work local, we stand a better chance of improving learning opportunities minoritized students across different communities.

Interpret Data and Set Equity Goals in Historical Context

Data do not speak for themselves—they require interpretation. Although quantitative information provided by tools like EQUIP can be useful, those numbers only tell part of the story. Teachers need to think carefully about how and why they interpret equity patterns the way

they do.

One challenge teachers face is how to balance thinking of their students *as individuals* with a recognition of them *as members of social marker groups*. To illustrate, consider the classroom depicted in Figure 2. The heat map shows that two boys, Rick (White) and Jalen (Black), have been dominating class discussions, and a Latinx girl named Julisa had no opportunities to participate. Many teachers find this scenario problematic, but they do so for different reasons. If students are only seen as individuals, then teachers might take up equality as the primary goal and look for all students to participate at the same rate. On the other hand, if one takes into account histories of Black boys not receiving a fair share of learning opportunities, Jalen's participation might be seen as relatively equitable. From that historical perspective, quantitative inequality can be interpreted as equitable in certain cases.

In thinking about Julisa, we have also seen teachers interpret zero-participation as evidence of individual personality traits (i.e., they are just "quiet"), or take a deficit view that Julisa lacks the competence to participate. However, we encourage teachers to think about how pedagogical structures and classrooms norms affect what students do in class. To that end, we always try to interpret EQUIP data in relation to teachers' own professional knowledge of their students, as well as other data sources (e.g., the classroom video itself). Coaching conversations with teachers can also open dialogue about how White supremacy, patriarchy, and other oppressive forces might explain the data.

All of this matters because it influences how teachers set specific equity goals. If biases are historically rooted, then anti-bias efforts should attend to historical context. Doing so can support teachers in coordinating individualistic and social marker-based understandings of minoritized students and their learning needs.

Collaborate and Iterate with Colleagues

Anti-bias work can be lonely, difficult work. Interrogating the ways one might be inadvertently causing harm to students can produce feelings of shame and anxiety. Educators we work with have found success pursuing anti-bias work in small learning communities. For example, over the course of a school year we supported a group of middle grades mathematics teachers engaged in cycles of action research using EQUIP. Teachers gathered for lunch, discussed their EQUIP data, and shared ideas about new teaching practices to address inequities. They kept a running Google docs where they maintained action plans. Every six weeks teachers reconvened after collecting another round of data, and collectively reflected on and revised their action plans.

One reason this group found success is that *relationships matter.* The teachers developed trust with their colleagues; a trust that allowed them to share their struggles without being judged. It helped that all of the teachers discovered at least one bias that was previously unknown to them. Our emphasis was on growth, not perfection. Also, the iterative nature of the approach signaled to the group that anti-bias work is long-term work.

Where the Rubber Meets the Road

Bias in class discussions is just one facet of the complex inequities that minoritized students face everyday in schools. But it is also something that teachers have a degree of control over, which makes it an important lever for change. It is a practical place where the rubber meets the road in terms of students' opportunities to learn.

For teachers like Jack, active monitoring of potential biases through classroom-level data—coupled with opportunities for coaching and collegial feedback—can open new pathways toward more equitable forms of teaching. School leaders can support anti-bias efforts by

empowering teachers with the longitudinal resources needed to do this work in collaborative ways.

In all of our work with teachers, we have yet to meet a teacher who says they are actively trying to marginalize students. And yet, we know this happens. As educators we must move with urgency to close the gap between intentions and action.

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Bios:

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