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## **Teaching for Equity, Learning about Discrimination in a Meritocratic Society**

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# Teaching for Equity, Learning about Discrimination in a Meritocratic Society

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## Abstract

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In this paper, we will examine key points for research attention in the effort to commit educational systems to equity education. We will examine the concepts of equity, equality and discrimination. We will give specific attention to the role of teacher educators. Teachers need to understand and to be able to see social discrimination in educational systems and policies and in classroom relationships. We will claim that equity education holds low priority even in those countries making the strongest efforts at social equity and protection of human rights. And the reason for low priority as we see it is the almost universal demand for discriminating among students on narrow academic grounds.

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**Keywords:** equity education, social discrimination, meritocracy, teaching teachers, self and social identity

# Enseñando para la Equidad, Aprendiendo sobre Discriminación Social en una Sociedad Meritocrática

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## Resumen

En este artículo analizamos algunos puntos clave en el ámbito de la investigación educativa en el esfuerzo de comprometer los sistemas educativos con la educación para la equidad. Examinamos los conceptos de equidad, igualdad y discriminación, prestando una atención especial al papel de la formación del profesorado en estos procesos sociales. El profesorado necesita comprender y desarrollar la sensibilidad para percibir las discriminaciones sociales tanto en las políticas y en el sistema educativo, como en las propias relaciones que se establecen dentro de las aulas. Planteamos que, incluso en aquellos países que hacen un gran esfuerzo para promover la equidad social y proteger los derechos humanos, la educación equitativa no es una prioridad. Consideramos que la razón de esa baja prioridad reside en la demanda casi universal de discriminación de los estudiantes a partir de criterios académicos restrictivos.

**Palabras claves:** educación equitativa, discriminación social, meritocracia, formación de profesorado, identidad social y personal

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**E**quity is fairness. We think of equity as a property of a social system and the comprehension of equity as a school responsibility. Society as a whole has an ethical disposition toward equity—weak or strong--and variation in its proclamations and practices ranges considerably from time to time and sector to sector. There is variation within neighborhoods, within corporations, churches, families, and of course within schools--and across--with contradiction not uncommon and contention waxing and waning. Ethical devotion to equity is as vivid, situated, and changing as the weather.

Equity is assurance to all persons, individually and collectively, for provision and protection of the well being of life, with guarantees for opportunity to improve it. Not even in an ideal world does equity mean equal resources for all individuals. The preciousness of difference in individuals comes with different needs and aspirations. But equity is approached when effort is made to support individuals in some highly proportionate way.

A society's awareness of equity and its satisfactions and disappointments is seldom more than rudimentary. We study a society as to its good life in simplistic measures, hoping for some validity, but always knowing that even the individuals making up the society have inadequate language to express themselves. We know that equity is not equality, and that an equal distribution of resources would not closely approximate wise care of the people.

Most individuals live as members of groups, and each one's sense of equity is greatly influenced by the values of his or her groups, probably influenced a bit by the almost unknowable values of the society. Most efforts to improve the values of the society will pass through the workings of social spaces, including classrooms. Some changes will occur through the individuality of persons. Knowing these passages is not what educational research has missed. Knowing how to teach groups and, at the same time, foster individual discoveries continues to be a duty of professionals and researchers.

As we write these words, the education community faces a student body and society little disposed to make lives more equitable. The stretch of social responsibility to all places televised and to all reaches of heterogeneous schools has wearied the public. A social distance scale

(Bogardus, 1926) has reduced caring and catering to the children of family and friends. Research needs to help us understand the vulnerabilities of gated communities.

After public education developments of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries, the English comprehensive school might have been the last great effort to extend educational opportunity to the poor. But it became more an effort to give access to every learning opportunity to every child, thus making nicely fitting opportunity, either incomprehensible or boring, to all but those in the middle. We do not so much need research on how to make teaching effective, as much as how to spur educational policy toward rating effective teaching over standardization and schools as sorting machines (Spring, 1988).

The troubles we have with teaching for equity and learning about discrimination are not a failing of research, although much more could be known. The troubles are greatly attributable to a grand perception of education as protection of existing opportunity and privilege, subscribed to by parents having even the least privilege to offer their children.

### **Meritocracy as a Constraint on Teaching for Equity**

It is common belief among teachers and citizens alike that a meritocratic society supports teaching toward equity. It is assumed that universal testing and promulgation of school learning standards helps “level the playing field”, giving all children equal opportunity to move up the socio-economic ladder. It is not so. A meritocratic society fosters competition in ways that assure those having had the most privilege for education will get disproportionate share of the social benefits.

Meritocracy was invented to run governments more efficiently, not to share privilege with the poor. The Chinese of ten centuries ago followed the advice of Confucius and replaced government leadership by dynastic inheritance with government by civil servants having passed examinations. More than a century ago, rather abruptly, the British sought military and commercial superiority by installing the more psychometrically competent people to run government and industrial departments, to some extent replacing the sons of landed and titled fathers. The Americans soon created the Civil Service Commission to

end “the spoils system.” Merit before inheritance and “cronyism.”

The history of meritocracy in Great Britain 1800-1950 has been ingeniously told by Michael Young (1958). He saw education as a key factor. As it was earlier, prestigious schools delivered nobility’s graduates to the highest work responsibilities such as national administration while trade schools delivered skilled workers to menial work settings. With meritocracy, test performance and on-the-job merit became the basis first for civil service selection and later in other work settings, with women and minorities ever so gradually fitting in.

Cultures of the home, church, and society resisted the changes. Strong were their traditions for who would do what work. The schools were resistant too, having their own expectations, predominantly the merit of compliance, as to who should benefit from further education and appointment.

Many scholars pressed forward. In *Sixty Years of Fabianism* (1962), George Bernard Shaw said: “The haphazard mobocracy must be replaced by democratic aristocracy; that is, by the dictatorship, not of the whole proletariat, but of that five percent of it capable of conceiving the job and pioneering in the drive toward its divine goal” (p. 307).

With meritocratic disposition, more children would have the privilege of being tested and a few or more would climb the social ladder a rung or two, and a smaller few to the top (Meritocracy Party, 2012). But more precise definition of competence is not a recipe for equity. It is a redefinition of “elite.” This rationale for reform lacked the ring of the U. S. Constitution, which sought to assure that “all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”

The result would be that a meritocratic elite would be created, at best a sharing of privilege in some proportion to the contribution made to establishing and protecting the well-being of all citizens, at worst drawing privilege grossly away from those with fewer talents. And in the two or four large English speaking meritocracies and in other developed nations, both the best and worst have happened. Civil servants are mentally able. The conceptually able have a better safety net. The able have a rationale for discriminating against the less able. “Occupy Wall Street” drew attention to the benefits chasm between the

top 1% and the rest of the American society. Amelioration of social inequity cannot wait on governments to become more efficient. (Wikipedia, 2012).

Efficiency is not reason enough. It continues to be claimed by the British Meritocracy Party (2012) that putting social responsibility in the hands of the most able facilitates social mobility, that most then will live a better life than their parents. It can be argued that, with the meritocratic advances now in place, that materialistic goods are cheaper and more available. But, welfare of the financial system increasingly dominates government policy. Bailouts for the rich, austerity for the poor. There are too few jobs, and increasingly few for full time workers (Judt, 2010).

Today, there are streams of meritocracy in government and industry, and more in education (Halberstam, 1972), but the management of social affairs today around the world is little tied to merit. It might not make any difference, given the power of the existing world's institutions, but part of the problem of meritocracy is an inadequate definition of merit. Intelligence is far from enough (Gladwell, 2012). Competence is a poor indicator of performance. Effort is important but situational, as is past performance on-the-job. Were they all put together, and regularly upgraded, meritocracy might have a leg to stand on, but the inventiveness of those who would fake merit has always risen to compete with those who will measure it.

The merit of meritocracy is partly to be found in its treatment of and effects upon the less meritorious. Are those who govern through their greater comprehension committed to the well-being of citizens in general? Of course it will vary from place to place, from time to time. But there is an abiding disposition to take care of "our own kind," and the own kind of the meritorious is the meritorious. The correlation between intelligence and compassion is not high. There will be few normal times, emergencies will demand that some resources be drawn from equity, sacrifices will be distributed according to the eloquence of claims for addressing the emergency. Merit is to be found in the eloquence of departures from equity.

Meritocracy is fundamentally a form for distributing privilege in an inequitable manner. After efficiency, its value is in the hope that the

experience and talent of our leaders will compellingly address the problems of the less privileged.

Teachers are disposed to recognize and honor merit. Their practice is devoted to the increase of merit. They admire and advocate for systems of merit, within their own profession, in their classrooms, and in their communities. They are aware that academic merit is not equivalent to organizational and social merit, and look for a more complex definition of meritocracy than in Michael Young's book. Still, they too, as in the homes, communities and societies of the past, are protective of the educational system as it is. They preach merit, and have situational definitions of it.

Teaching their students the ethics of merit is difficult because the arbitrariness of the concept of merit is apparent to the parents and the students themselves. Learning is regularly equated with merit and so the rationale for meritocracy will dominate the classroom. Privileges, including teacher attention, will lean toward those making academic progress, those already evidencing merit. Learning may be complex but simple definition of merit will prevail. But the ethics of merit require a fair, complex, and individualistic definition. Resolution requires a thoughtful ongoing analysis of the treatment of students, and, given the reluctance of the educational system to address these ethics, they rely largely on the intuition and social sensitivity of the teacher.

Teaching their student the ethics of equity is difficult because the competing ethics are strong. A social order of privilege is accepted as the natural state of affairs, there always will be the rich and there always will be the poor. Ameliorating the gap in privilege needs some sense of justice, that augmenting benefits to the poor depends on some grounds for deserving it. The Constitution, the Bible, the Emancipation Proclamation and the American Pledge of Allegiance are inadequate calls for equity; the just redistribution of resources needs a calculation of input, investment, social contribution showing levels of deserving it. A teacher cannot give all A's, all F's, or all C's. The work of the school will continue to be discriminative, more than emancipatory.

Meritocracy exists throughout the schools in a strong way, often obscure, regularly admired. The ethic is pervasive but seldom talked about. Teachers of all ages, styles, and personalities practice it. Only a



few of them consider equity a point of view worth explaining or defending. They express a commitment to fairness but seldom to equity. There are too many reasons to be discriminating. Meritocracy captures many of those reasons. Meritocracy, whatever its form, is a constraint on the teaching of equity in the schools.

### **Learning about Discrimination and Pernicious Discrimination.**

Discrimination has changed its face. It used to be a word simply meaning recognition of differences, differences of any kind. For most people, it now means treating people badly because of certain personal characteristics. It used to be good have a discriminating eye. It now is bad to treat as inferior or undeserving certain people because of their race, age or gender or any other perception of group inferiority. Discrimination has come to mean intolerant and unfair acknowledgement of individual differences among humans.

Psychometricians constructing educational and psychological tests have long used a coefficient of discrimination to indicate the effectiveness of test items to contribute to the total score. There is a general expectation that those who score well on the test are likely to receive greater educational or employment privilege, but test item discrimination ordinarily remains impersonal, un related to the negative effects that testing might have on social well being.

And yet it might be said that in matters as personal as teaching and learning, any perceptual discrimination is likely to associate quickly with preferences and prejudices. Many of the formal agencies of the culture encourage a compliance with existing social structure, a willingness to abide by rules and regulations, including preserving the meritocracy. But many informal alliances, work and leisure cohorts, particularly in isolated communities, encourage protest against the status quo, often implying offensive forces out beyond the horizon. This is to say that there may be no dispassionate discrimination, for any sensitivity at all will be associated with causes and advocacies, and potentially become pernicious.

### **Teaching for Equity**

Schools are responsible for understanding and promoting equity. Educators are aware of the complexity of the issue. Teaching for equity faces resistance from social organizations based on hierarchical relationships between privileged and underprivileged groups. Teaching for equity can become a process of grounded discussions among teacher educators, students and researchers, examining the role they play in building equity, and the support they give to the reproduction of social discrimination processes in our contemporary meritocratic societies. Actually, we tend to use the same words for supporting fairness and for maximizing academic potential but give them different meanings. We believe we are sharing the same concept, while talking about different things from different perspectives. Thus, it would be useful to make explicit the practices of equity, to negotiate experiences and to extend efforts to achieve it.

At many times equity is understood as equal opportunities or equal treatment. They are thought of as abstractions, without taking into account the unequal contexts where real people live. Very often the aim becomes one of legitimating privilege, social discrimination and inequity. Historically, individuals and groups have had unbalanced access and control to economical and symbolic resources (Bourdieu, 1997) so they move from different starting points as to skills and possibilities. Abstract equality is a principle of exclusion that works to widen the social and economic gap between groups. Differences among individuals and groups should not be grounds for legitimating domination, furthering inequality and marginalization of less empowered groups. From an equity perspective, it is possible to be increasingly heterogeneous and working toward a more equitable society.

Diversity and difference are not the drivers of inequity, although in fact, our societies are diverse, complex and unequal. Inequity is part of social structure and organization at global and local levels (Rigoglioso, 2012). Inequity is constructed and assumed on symbolic and structural levels in the ecological world system. In huge part, inequity depends on the global economical system. However, inequity is also constructed

and supported subjectively by interpersonal relationships (families, schools, jobs, etc.). It is deeply rooted in everyday interpersonal and intergroup relationships. Conscientiously or not, schools, teachers and students take active part in the process of discrimination as well as in the rise of equity.

Schools are complex realities and diversity is one of their most significant features. Many people from different countries, from different cultures, are living together everywhere. Mobility is high in our modern societies and migration is an important issue. Migration exists for different reasons. Poverty and war are large suppliers of persons displaced from their homes, but they are not the only ones. Business, marketing, modern life styles, adventure, entertainment, jobs, new technologies and so on are responsible for many migration stories. Even though we slip into thinking all immigrants are the same, each one has a personal story and comes from a different local context for different reasons. It often is not easy to see the persons beyond our tags of prejudice.

Coexistence between people from different countries in schools and communities is sometimes conflicted. It is easier to identify the groups, those of 'Us' and 'the Others', but actual boundaries are not so clear. Gender, race, social class, culture, age, able and skills are social categories defining human subgroups. Their different life experiences lead them to construct diverging points of view.

In many ways diversity is a huge source of learning and creativity. Innovative processes emerge when people with different perspectives work together, establishing a real dialog. But living and sharing experiences and feelings with others is not easy for most of us. For matters we care deeply about, it is hard to understand others' points of view. There are many worlds in the World. A huge part of our socialization process consists in becoming a member of a specific society. We learn and internalize the world of meanings shared by our family and community.

Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1991), writing about primary socialization processes, said that: "the individual not only takes on the roles and attitudes of others, but in the same process takes on their world" (p.152). At the end of the primary socialization process the

individual is an effective member of the society and he or she has subjectively a Self and a world. “The child does not internalize the world of his or her ‘significant others’ as one of the many possible worlds, but as The World, the only one out there and only one which may be thought” (p. 171).

Even having learned about our little world as “the normal world”, there are many different “normal worlds”. We often live in very small worlds with our family, our friends and other people whom we feel more or less equal to us. So, education should be a process to construct some bridges connecting different worlds. Teaching involves sharing languages, symbolic codes, culture and science heritage. Through education we should improve human knowledge and human development, not just from our little world perspective, but learning together from rich and different worlds.

On teaching for equity we recognize specific worlds, individualities and students’ personal needs as well as specific groups’ situations and their specific needs. However, “special needs” are less a matter of intrinsic and individual student characteristics and more a matter of relationships among different people. Too often the inclusion of learning about diversity in schools is understood as fitting “special students” with “special needs” into an academic standards context or even how to adapt academic context a little bit to attend to special students and *their* needs. We propose to think about education for equity as how to create conditions to teach and learn together and to nurture personal interaction in friendly school environments. Our start point could be: everyone is different and needs rich opportunities to learn and develop their skills and human potential.

### **Teaching Teachers about Teaching for Equity**

Teaching future teachers and educators about equity is a key task to promote equity at schools and communities. It is not easy at all. As William-Write (2012) noted, “Equitable education is the Civil Rights struggle of the 21st Century” (p.183). We are sure that the 21st Century will have more than one struggle, but we agree that equitable education is one of the most important challenges of the present Century.

Education policies as well as teaching dynamics established in our schools teach, along side and through the official curriculum, patterns of social organization, including meritocracy, to maintain the status quo of the different social groups. Change is taught too, but the maintenance priorities are higher than the change. Students are learning rules and relationship patterns for their lives.

Jerome Bruner (1982) talked about ‘formats’ of language acquisition to explain how parent relationships lead children, when they learn language, they learn more than language. They learn communication and culture. So also are scholastic relationships like *formats* where teachers and students learn about relations among individuals and groups. Classrooms are scenarios (Goffman, 1959) that reproduce social discrimination existent in society, but also they are scenarios to promote the education of future teachers of equity. And can be made better.

From our point of view, the first step on teaching for equity is to be more aware and to perceive social discrimination. Feminist language uses the expression “to wear gender glasses” to see gender discrimination. The glasses metaphor is useful not only for that but it represents the necessity to train our sensitivity to identify social discrimination and to reduce social myopia. This discrimination is more visible as we become more sensitive. Melvin Hall (2012) claims that the students’ “viewpoint is resistant to change: new material has to be integrated, accommodated, altered, or rejected--some things literally cannot be seen”.

Recent literature talks widely about modern racism (Bell, 1992; McGonahay, 1983; William-White, 2012) and sexism (Rudman & Glick, 2008; Glick et al, 2000; Cruz, 2012; etc.) as subtle race and sex discrimination in democratic societies. Formally, our societies are fairer and pretend to be more tolerant, but they have become even more unequal. Prejudices are hidden and it is thus more difficult to avoid their consequences. Equal rights are in the laws and explicit social rules and almost everyone, weak or strong, advocates for equal opportunities, but people are not aware of their own biases. William-White (2012) talks about “educational inequity in public schools and in the academy” from her position as “*Black teacher* in a public school setting” (p.177) bringing her experience to us: ““We *all* promote social justice in our

teaching.’ remarks the White woman sitting two tables in front of me during the advisory meeting. As she affirmatively speaks, my eyes wander, creating tableaux of the various people represented at this gathering. Interested in seeing how this exclamation is being received, I inspect several poker-faced expressions (mainly from folks of color) which offer no reaction to the notion that *everyone...*” (p. 178).

*Everyone* feels themselves promoting social justice and equity. So, why are our societies still unfair and inequitable? The invisibility of the mechanisms of social discrimination (racism, sexism, classism, disability...) is one of the most effective blocks to equity promotion. Although obvious, if we cannot see the inequities and how they are being produced in the local and global societies, it is difficult to change them. Thus being aware of the invisibility and blockage should be one of the first tasks.

Nowadays different kinds of pernicious discrimination and prejudices are hidden in our educational relationships and quotidian practices. Interactions between social discrimination and meritocratic society are strong and they reinforce each other. There is “education for all”. In spite of it, social discrimination is at work in social practices in and around the schools. Until the financial crisis, access to the educational system for almost everyone has been easier than ever before, but progress has diminished. Education promotion is based on segregation with standardized measurement, purportedly equal for all, but with huge differential effects on personal, familiar and social resources.

Melvin Hall of Northern Arizona University asks his students in class about social discrimination and Self, calling for examples from personal experience. He (2012) claims the first goal is to provide individuals with a way to locate the origins of, and influences on, their perceptions of events around them and more broadly. In his classes he tries to build a confident learning space to achieve sincere dialogue about how everyone in their own way commits social discrimination.

So we see it more than important, but necessary to teach teachers and educators, present and future, about equity. Based on our own experience in teacher education, we present some conceptual tools on teaching teachers for equity. First, we present some theories that help us to understand social discrimination processes as part of interpersonal

and intergroup relationships. These theoretical contents are developed and worked with students in the dynamic of the classes. Secondly, we show one of our strategies for working with students to construct opportunities to deal with different scenarios and formats. With them, they will be able to try out unusual contacts with underprivileged groups. Taking into account Hall's (2012) experiences and proposals, we emphasize the need to improve teacher reflexivity about their own lives and to be more aware of discrimination against perspectives held by individuals from other social environments.

**1. Seeing and teaching to see the unseen.** Teachers and educators should understand relations between social discrimination and construction of self and social identities as a process of interaction among individuals and groups. This is a part of learning about social discrimination, equity, and how we are committed in this complex reality. Through cultural and individual experience we have learned to classify groups of people and we subjectively represent groups in terms of boundaries and intrinsic characteristics shared by members of groups. Hall (2012) claims the first goal is to provide individuals with a way to locate the origins of, and influences on, their biased perceptions of events around them.

According to Henri Tajfel (1981), social categorization processes lead us to exaggerate differences among members of different categories while minimizing the differences within the same social category, and emphasizing even more the intergroup differentiation. For instance, we have learned throughout history to see gender as two universal categories with culturally assigned characteristics (Braidotti, 2004). What is and what "should be," a man and a woman are defined by belonging to a gender group. The characteristics of each gender group are constructed as opposed to the other, while blurring uniqueness of specific groups of men and women and the uniqueness of each woman and each man. Furthermore, there is a hierarchy of groups and subgroups based on parameters established from the relations of power and domination developed throughout history, assigning ratings to their characteristics from those power relations.

Social Identity Theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1979; Tajfel, 1981, 1982) helps us to understand personal and social processing of group



relationships. The two authors claim that important parts of Self are constructed by participating in groups and being aware of belonging to social types. By being a member of a group we define ourselves and at the same time we learn to distinguish “us” from “others”. What we understand as identity defines boundaries between ‘Self/Us’ and the ‘Others’. Self is immersed in the one or more, 'us-groups', depending on the groups in which the individual participates and is identified as a member.

So, social identity would be a set of factors or happenings that individuals construct from awareness of different groups membership and the emotional and evaluative meaning that results from participation (Tajfel, 1981). Hall (2012) utilizes images from the game, Trivial Pursuit, to explain to his students the set of factors or happenings needed for self-identity. To him, a collection of identity components can be seen as in the pie chart above.



*Figure I. Factors in Self-Identity. Hall (2012)*

**Constructing Social Identities.** Social identities are constructed as a kind of confrontation with other significant groups, for instance, families, friends, neighborhoods, others cultures and countries, TV or Pop stars, media characters and so on. Positive and negative valences of social identity result from comparative judgment of the in-group and other significant groups.

Human beings need positive social identities and nearly everyone visibly tries to get and keep their social identity as positive as possible.



In-group evaluations tend to be more positive than out-groups evaluations, especially among members of higher status groups (Scheepers, Spears, Doosje & Manstead, 2006). Different authors claim that if the social identity value is positive, members of these groups try to hold up other groups to their model. “If we are so nice, rich, intelligent and so on, everybody else wishes to be like us.” Why not? Teachers tend to see many students as possible future members of their cultural group and try to extend their identity characteristics to those pupils. Many teachers demand a strong effort from their students to fit into their social group and behave according to its characteristics.

On the other hand, when in-group evaluations are less positive, that is, when social identity is not positive enough, its members try to change their situation. Tajfel (1982) has studied individual and collective strategies to promote changes in a group’s social position. He identifies several different ways they try to get a “better” social identity. For instance, members try to abandon this group for a more positive one (migration is a strong example of attempting social mobility; people from rural areas move to towns or cities, people move from poor or devalued countries, cultures or economies to a more popular, fashionable or privileged place). Another possibility is to try to move our group to a better social position (as do some social movements).

Any change depends in part on the perception of **legitimacy** and **stability** of the privileged and underprivileged position. When group status differences are stable, group members are relatively certain about their group’s superiority or inferiority (Scheepers, Spears, Doosje & Manstead, 2006) and they try little to change anything. Social changes are less possible when members of the group feel and think about themselves as in an inferior or superior social position, one that is legitimate and stable, as if they were natural and fixed.

Education for equity should lead teachers and students, especially when drawn from unlike groups, to inquire into the legitimacy of subordination and social discrimination. When group members can see the illegitimacy and instability of their position, they are more likely to want to work for equity. They move to a readiness to promote alliances among individuals and groups and collective strategies for social change.

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**2. Giving opportunity for intergroup contact.** From personal experience as teachers, we try to break social inequity and reduce social discrimination and prejudice in teacher education by improving student contacts with “others”, that is, with members of different social groups and contexts. We need to learn to see what we have in common with different groups and recognize the differences as simply characteristics and not as stigmas. Remembering that we live in small and segregated worlds, we can use research findings and inquiry groups as educational resources to promote contact with and knowledge of different communities and cultures. We often learn more when we teach something to others than “studying” it (in a traditional way). So we have proposed to our students the challenge of learning about a particular social group by interacting directly with its members. After their research they have to teach about it to their classmates. We expect this to lead to less prejudiced conceptions and positions regarding the group.

Many studies show intergroup contact as a strong way to reduce racial and ethnic prejudices. It appears particularly effective if the groups share a similar status, interests and tasks (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Identifying similarities often increases when people have more contact. So, it is important to try promoting intergroup contact within teacher education programs as well as holding discussions on the process of awareness about self discriminating and discriminative positions.

Intergroup contact, though important, is usually not enough to reduce prejudice and social discrimination. People see what they want to see. Sometimes students just endure the intergroup contact, reaffirming the bias. Moreover, our experiences show that students sometimes say what teachers want to hear. So we need to improve their predisposition to want to see positive aspects of underprivileged groups, or at least to

create the possibility to see differently the complications and hurt of their biases. Discussion and contrast of opinions and thoughts usually facilitate movement away from intolerance. The opinions of classmates are sometimes a way to move resistant individuals, although some become more fixed in their views. Moving feelings and thoughts toward tolerance needs not mean just seeking to hide prejudices. Just the opposite, teaching for equity demands that teachers and students be able to express their personal commitments in a real dialogue. Teacher educators teaching for equity should try to create trustworthy contexts for sharing experiences among different individuals from different social groups, gaining non-trivial contact and negotiating meanings and social spaces from equity perspectives. It is hard work.

### **Diminishing the Effects of Meritocracy on the Teaching of Equity**

Meritocracy has many effects on the school. It affects school policy, teacher relations, and student engagement. Perhaps it most sharply affects the ethic of achievement in the classroom. Meritocracy is the name for a scholastic atmosphere of competition, discrimination, and aspiration to be superior. It tells not that the student "be the best that you can be" as much as to "be better than the others." The academic testing of students is reported not in terms of what the examinee has learned but how he or she stands among other examinees.

Most educators perpetuate and glorify this individualistic ethic, pitting each child against the other children. Parents endorse meritocratic discrimination because they know that selection and advancement in further education, benefits to their loved ones, are largely based on percentile standings. Their urge, understandably, is to help their children, even if they already are among the most privileged. As Joel Spring wrote of the U.S.A. in 1988, the #1 national policy in education is to sort the students into those with more talent and those with less.

for individuals, experts, and agencies. It is a system that finds group problem solving problematic in determining a grade point average.

Teachers and administrators recognize the problems of an individual child, as they do every day, regularly looking for ways to relieve the hurt. They care for well being, yet maintain the meritocratic course as the main way for the afflicted student to rise above problems and gain happiness. Do better, and put others further behind. Winning conquers all, but all cannot be winners.

The schools have a responsibility for teaching equity, not just as a contextual philosophy but as a classroom practice. No concept of social studies is more important. But the teaching of equity occurs in a hostile environment. It is not that teachers reject the idea that values and mores can be taught at the same time as mathematics and history—although there will be questions about time spent. The struggle accompanies grading, with its ethic of competition. Equity calls for everyone helping those who compete poorly, but competition treats that as cheating. Remedial studies promise opportunity to catch up, but the gap is never closed. The system helps those who are ahead stay ahead, distancing them further from the under-served.

In earlier pages we treated equity mostly as a matter of reducing discrimination against far off people who are recognizably different. Yet each person is recognizably different. Meritocracy in school concentrates on discriminating against those who look and act pretty much the same but do poorly in performing some task. Still the personal remedy is very much the same. Become aware. Get acquainted. Be empathic. Seize opportunities to understand the conceptual habitat of the slower learners. The institutional remedy is much more difficult.

Teachers themselves are victims too of these biases. However gifted, they have experienced them through their lives and experience them still in hallways, lunchrooms and at parent conferences. They too are victims of a meritocracy that rewards a short list of talents and treats indifferently many other talents. They need the safety of assurance and reflection.

Whether in pre-service courses or in-service professional development, they need opportunity to think deeply and confer openly

about the ubiquity and complexity of discrimination and the confrontation between equity and meritocracy. They should be encouraged to believe that society's exalting of single dimension superiorities is insufficient support for single dimension grading and diminished attention to the poor performers.

We can change society, the school, and teacher training a small amount, without supposing institutional meritocratic values can be washed away. There was a time before meritocracy and there may be a time after, but it appears a given condition for the schools and schools of education that we will know. We should concentrate on changing each mind a small degree, and each classroom to take a step toward acknowledging the link between inequity and meritocracy.

Teaching for equity calls for creating trust and protected spaces to think deeply about our feelings and behaviors, to make visible our identity and biases, and to discuss them freely. Identity is an active process throughout life, natural and often benign, and useful both in constructing borders and bridges between 'Us' and 'Others'. Teaching for equity is a search for strategies to open students' and teachers' eyes about small as well as massive social discrimination. Each should be aware of tools for constructing more equitable relations in social and education contexts. Many teachers are looking for teaching methods and trying to teach for equity. May they find ways that suit their situations.

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