

# 5 Ways Teachers Can Challenge Inequality in The Classroom

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**Abstract:** The best classroom assessments also serve as meaningful sources of information for teachers, helping them identify what they taught well and what they need to work on. Gathering this vital information does not require a sophisticated statistical analysis of assessment results. Teachers need only make a simple tally of how many students missed each assessment item or failed to meet a specific criterion. State assessments sometimes provide similar item-by-item information, but concerns about item security and the cost of developing new items each year usually make assessment developers reluctant to offer such detailed information. Once teachers have made specific tallies, they can pay special attention to the trouble spots—those items or criteria missed by large numbers of students in the class.

School produce inequality. Work carried out by educational sociologists such as Kalwant Bhopal, David Gillborn and Deborah Youdell shows that the everyday practices of teaching and learning exclude already marginalised groups of students while guaranteeing success for others.

## I. INTRODUCTION

### How to help students settle into the new school year

My own research found that in a climate where teachers are under extreme pressure to produce results, practices such as ability setting, continual student assessments, shaming behaviour management approaches and short-hand descriptors of students – such as “low ability” or “SEN” – are commonplace. Students who are already part of minority groups in society – for instance, due to race, class, gender or a disability – are disproportionately represented in so-called low ability groups; often score below average in tests (because of the system rather than the students); and are frequently misrepresented or underrepresented in curriculum material presented in class.

So how can we address educational inequalities from inside the classroom? I spent a year working as a class teacher to find out – observing and recording what happened when I attempted to intervene in the production of inequalities in my primary school classroom. Here are some different approaches I explored, which teachers could try in their own schools.

## II. RETHINK ABILITY GROUPING

Is ability grouping necessary? Try different ways of organising groups of students in the classroom. Rather than creating separate activities based on a preconceived idea of ability, students could work through tasks with differing levels of challenge. This allows them to think about what they can achieve and does not label anyone incapable.

Try providing more open-ended activities that require the students to problem-solve and draw on a range of skills. For example, see if they can make a tower strong enough to hold a marble with a given set of materials, or invite students to plan a class party that needs invitations, decorations and food.

Allow them to work together – one student may be good at writing while another may be more creative. Students can support each other and surprise themselves and you. Sometimes they will all be given the same task and will produce something different from it (writing stories of different lengths and complexities, for example). The important thing is not to predetermine what students can achieve before they have started.

## III. CHECK YOUR LANGUAGE

Interrogate the language you use to describe your pupils and the language used by students themselves in the classroom. Nobody is inherently low ability, discourses of “boys will be boys” or “hardworking, helpful girls” limit everyone in the class, as do ideas about “lads” and “bitchy girls” – such double standards need challenging.

Some students still use the term “gay” to describe something negative, which can cause those exploring their own sexuality or who come from queer families to feel unsafe. Using labels such as “naughty” or “silly” to describe pupils, even if not used in front of the students themselves, can quickly stick and alter how students are perceived.

## IV. MAKE THE CURRICULUM RELEVANT

Who decides the curriculum? Is it representative of the students in the class, reflecting their experiences, histories and questions? It isn't possible to make the curriculum relevant to all of the students all the time, but consider asking them what they would like to learn about. When I did this with the class of six- and seven-year-olds, we planned out a whole term of activities around the topic of babies, through film, writing and other activities – linking together subjects across the curriculum, and reflecting some of the students' own experiences.

Where it's not possible to alter curriculum material, critical conversations could be started around the points of view represented in lessons from history, science or literature. I've changed my questioning to encourage students to think about whose point of view we are hearing. For example, drawing children's attention to the gender of scientists and suggesting they find out about female scientists; or when we learn about kings and queens, who are we not learning about? – if school resources show only white people in Tudor times, for instance, encourage students to ask questions about why people of colour are not represented.

## V. AVOID QUICK-FIX PUNISHMENTS

Many behavior management systems in schools are incredibly shaming for students. Having your name written under a sad face, being made to stand up during assembly, or being asked to sit on the floor in another classroom, are publicly humiliating practices that would seem shocking if carried out in an adult place of work.

Such practices are a quick fix in a busy school day but, in the long run, rarely result in behavioural changes from a student. Consider where space could be opened up for conversation rather than punishment. Can the language around bad behaviour be challenged to make room for more compassionate understanding of students who don't so easily conform?

## VI. NURTURE RELATIONSHIPS

Ultimately, all of these methods aim to help priorities teacher-student relationships and the relationships between students in the classroom. It's these relationships that allow the student to be seen as a person, as opposed to, for instance, a middle-ability child.

When we connect with the students in front of us by respecting them as people, listening to their point of view, acknowledging their difficulties and acting from a place of compassion, we end up being able to critique the assessments the students take, rather than the students themselves. It is from here that we build a classroom, a school and an education system that is more inclusive of everyone.

## CONCLUSION

### *Make Assessments Useful*

#### **For Students**

Nearly every student has suffered the experience of spending hours preparing for a major assessment, only to discover that the material that he or she had studied was different from what the teacher chose to emphasize on the assessment. This experience teaches students two un-fortunate lessons. First, students realize that hard work and effort don't pay off in school because the time and effort that they spent studying had little or no influence on the results. And second, they learn that they cannot trust their teachers (Guskey, 2000a). These are hardly the lessons that responsible teachers want their students to learn.

Nonetheless, this experience is common because many teachers still mistakenly believe that they must keep their assessments secret. As a result, students come to regard assessments as guessing games, especially from the middle grades on. They view success as depending on how well they can guess what their teachers will ask on quizzes, tests, and other assessments. Some teachers even take pride in their ability to out-guess students. They ask questions about isolated concepts or obscure understandings just to see whether students are reading carefully. Generally, these teachers don't include such "gotcha" questions maliciously, but rather—often unconsciously—because such questions were asked of them when they were students.

Classroom assessments that serve as meaningful sources of information don't surprise students. Instead, these assessments reflect the concepts and skills that the teacher emphasized in class, along with the teacher's clear criteria for judging students' performance. These concepts, skills, and criteria align with the

teacher's instructional activities and, ideally, with state or district standards. Students see these assessments as fair measures of important learning goals. Teachers facilitate learning by providing students with important feedback on their learning progress and by helping them identify learning problems (Bloom, Madaus, & Hastings, 1981; Stiggins, 2002).

Critics sometimes contend that this approach means "teaching to the test." But the crucial issue is, What determines the content and methods of teaching? If the test is the primary determinant of what teachers teach and how they teach it, then we are indeed "teaching to the test." But if desired learning goals are the foundation of students' instructional experiences, then assessments of student learning are simply extensions of those same goals. Instead of "teaching to the test," teachers are more accurately "testing what they teach." If a concept or skill is important enough to assess, then it should be important enough to teach. And if it is not important enough to teach, then there's little justification for assessing it.

#### **For Teachers**

The best classroom assessments also serve as meaningful sources of information for teachers, helping them identify what they taught well and what they need to work on. Gathering this vital information does not require a sophisticated statistical analysis of assessment results. Teachers need only make a simple tally of how many students missed each assessment item or failed to meet a specific criterion. State assessments sometimes provide similar item-by-item information, but concerns about item security and the cost of developing new items each year usually make assessment developers reluctant to offer such detailed information. Once teachers have made specific tallies, they can pay special attention to the trouble spots—those items or criteria missed by large numbers of students in the class.

In reviewing these results, the teacher must first consider the quality of the item or criterion. Perhaps the question is ambiguously worded or the criterion is unclear. Perhaps students mis-interpreted the question. Whatever the case, teachers must determine whether these items adequately address the knowledge, understanding, or skill that they were intended to measure.

If teachers find no obvious problems with the item or criterion, then they must turn their attention to their teaching. When as many as half the students in a class answer a clear question incorrectly or fail to meet a particular criterion, it's not a student learning problem—it's a teaching problem. Whatever teaching strategy was used, whatever examples were employed, or whatever explanation was offered, it simply didn't work.

Analyzing assessment results in this way means setting aside some powerful ego issues. Many teachers may initially say, "I taught them. They just didn't learn it!" But on reflection, most recognize that their effectiveness is not defined on the basis of what they do as teachers but rather on what their students are able to do. Can effective teaching take place in the absence of learning? Certainly not.

Some argue that such a perspective puts too much responsibility on teachers and not enough on students. Occasionally, teachers respond, "Don't students have responsibilities in this process? Shouldn't students display initiative and personal accountability?"

Indeed, teachers and students share responsibility for learning. Even with valiant teaching efforts, we cannot guarantee that all students will learn everything excellently. Only rarely do teachers find items or assessment criteria that every student answers correctly. A few students are never willing to put forth the necessary effort, but these students tend to be the exception, not the rule. If a teacher is reaching fewer than half of the students in the class, the teacher's method of instruction needs to improve. And teachers need this kind of evidence to help target their instructional improvement efforts.

**Work Cited**

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