Equitable Education: Watching What We Say

The words we speak often can betray the outcomes we seek.

By Karen Starr, Ph.D.

Educators have been trying to achieve equitable education outcomes for a very long time. However, the terminology suitable to describe equity activities appears to be as elusive as the road necessary to travel to achieve these aims.

Policy terms such as disadvantaged schools and students at risk are examples of terms used to describe students who are the target of government equity funding initiatives. Equity policy rhetoric refers to communities in poverty and low-SES (socio-economic status) schools, characterized by:

- A high proportion of students with special needs, low motivation, low self-esteem and poor attainment.
- Transient student populations.
- High drop-out and low attendance rates.
- Cultural and language diversity.

Other terms include rustbelt schools and rustbelt kids (Thomson 2002), schools on the edge and schools in challenging circumstances (MacBeath et. al. 2006). These are terms used to describe schools that are, as MacBeath and colleagues say, conspicuously adrift of the average school performance.

Students at risk or high-risk students risk school failure and thwarted participation. Commentators argue that students at risk pose further risk to schools and fellow students, making them challenging or on the edge,
causing trouble, creating stress through bad behavior and low academic achievement, and reducing aggregate school achievement, attendance, and retention data.

Watching Our Language
The way we speak about schools and students does them a huge disservice, an injustice. There is a disconnect between equity intentions, actions, and language. Educators may unwittingly distance themselves from students and parents through language that implicitly adopts an us vs. them stance. Labelling students into disenfranchisement from the norm, a problem to be fixed while valorizing a classed, gendered, and raced status quo.

Referencing children of poverty and low-SES students creates problems. Constructing and portraying a group of students in totalizing, essentialist, deficit ways reinforces false, presumptuous, and limited thinking, images, and speech, and strengthens prejudices, intolerance, and negative stereotypes. Activities instigated in the name of improvement—unfortunately referred to as compensatory or remedial measures—usually focus on student deficiencies (their improper behaviors and values; their unsatisfactory cognitive strategies; their deficient backgrounds, for example), and not on overall discriminatory practices and prejudices and structural inequalities.

From this position, neither structural inequality, public policy, barriers to employment, nor lack of money cause the plight of the poor; the poor simply don’t have the right story structure, tone of voice, register, or cognitive strategies. In other words, deficit thinking roots poor achievement in students’ “inadequacies,” while inequitable schooling structures and procedures are presumed excusable.

Such implicit conceptions render educational policies, structures, and practices unfair, unjust, offensive, and undemocratic. An individualistic, blame-the-victim stance is in play. This is a critical point, since what education employees think and believe affects what and how they teach and the relationships they develop with students and their parents. Schooling is a political act that reflects broader social divisions of power and influence.

The community is intrinsically embedded within each school and reflected in student conduct, but schooling also reflects the political agendas and personal practices of school employees. While learning improvement is the aim, the chasms between schools, teachers, their students, and communities can confound equity efforts. The danger is that without a premium being placed on localized generative agency, knowledge and practices achieved through communication, current negative social divisions, and the unequal distribution of social capital are preserved.

Thomson (2002) noticed how professionals in her study of rural schools commonly referred to these students, this school, this community, thereby demarcating points of difference, an out-of-the-ordinaryness that marginalized students and parents, which she referred to as thinness. Being aware of thinness was a first step in understanding and addressing its negative effects.

Addressing Poverty
A related issue, and perhaps one of the trickiest being confronted, is the language used to address poverty. Bomer et al (2008) say that by definition, poverty means lack of money. “Poverty is a material condition not an ethical or behavioral one.” They assert that “[t]he making of the category children of poverty, and the positioning of the people within that category as problems for the education system certainly is not new” but while economic status may be an indicator that more support and resources may be required, it remains tied up with the social when we refer to low socio-economic status students.

In other words, the suggestion is that a low income is automatically associated with social deficiencies. And the word status is also problematic when preceded by the word low.
Good and McCaslin (2008) suggest that formal education needs to connect with students’ lives to embrace basic knowledge of individuals, their experiences, and values. To further understand the social and cultural contexts that have an impact on school dynamics, there is a need for solid understanding of parents’ and students’ views and life experiences ascertained by genuinely welcoming face-to-face discussions that are educative and constructive for everyone.

From this perspective, rather than remediating disadvantaged students, educators and school employees have access to a range of social and cultural tools and understandings to support and encourage all students to use their knowledge for learning. As Hopkins and colleagues (2003) contend, “[d]eprivation is still by far the biggest determinant of educational success,” thus investing energy in the local communities through inter-agency cooperation is surely a primary consideration.

Thankfully, discursive shifts are evident—although not all of these escape my criticism entirely. Phrases such as educational disadvantage, students at risk, and inequality of opportunity are slowly loosing appeal—the latter because it is now recognized that providing the same educational offerings and opportunities has not worked as an equity strategy.

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Thomson (2002) discusses educational outcomes within local and broader structural contexts in order to understand what creates and maintains difference and marginalization. The OECD (2008) endorses raising social capital—the social glue of shared values, norms, and understandings that facilitates cooperation among groups to foster access to networks and a sense of social belonging and trust. MacBeath et al (2007) argue that “[s]ocial capital theory helps us to gain a better understanding of attitudes to school learning when we extend our line of sight from school to community, to the local living environment, to housing and social services, employment opportunities, health and crime levels” and explain how circumstances such as unemployment change individuals’ perspectives, emphasize differences of opinion about what is important, and influence a school’s dynamics.

School improvement and successful student learning are relational activities that go hand-in-hand with community building—developing resilience and social capital. “Social justice” in schooling places the emphasis on teaching, school policies and practices, and systemic accountabilities. Hares et al (2006) believe this to be “a more equal distribution of the capacities and capabilities developed through education needs to be a goal of socially just schooling.”

Around the world, national goals for schooling provide ideas for closing the equity gap. The goals seek to achieve successful and confident learners.

Successful learning refers to essential skills, abilities, capabilities, and motivations: being literate and numerate, being creative and able to think critically, being motivated to reach one’s full potential, and to be engaged in lifelong learning, for example.

Confident learning refers to the values and social abilities of learners, such that the things they know and can do are translated into productive, healthy lifestyles: being optimistic, possessing self-esteem and respect for others, being creative users of information and technologies, behaving ethically and being able to embrace opportunities and make informed decisions, for example. These goals provide grist for curriculum, practice, and discursive reform.

Doing Justice

The language we use embodies the broad-sweeping cultural politics surrounding persistent equity issues in education. If governments are adamant that we actually do make a difference through education, then the language we use—which ironically is often spearheaded by policy discourse—needs to be one of many considerations for change.

Definitions and descriptors need to be questioned, alongside the internal logic behind the problems they seek to describe and address. Changing discursive practices is one part of a much larger task, but if we are genuine about “doing justice,” then this might be a good place to start.

References


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