Promoting Equity, Diversity and Social Justice School-Wide

■ PROJECT CO-ORDINATORS
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THE PROJECT IN BRIEF
The promotion of equity, diversity, and social justice was identified as a priority by both OISE’s Secondary Program 1 and University of Toronto Schools. Together, we developed an introductory workshop based on shared needs as teacher education partners. Teachers and teacher candidates were asked to critically examine their curriculum and instruction practices. Based on their analysis, they were encouraged to become more equity-oriented in their teaching. The teacher candidates examined how issues of diversity and equity were addressed in their current and future practices. They explored how issues of diversity and voice can be systematically integrated and addressed within curricular settings.

OBJECTIVES OF THIS PROJECT
• To heighten awareness of equity issues and develop social justice teaching skills through introductory workshops
• To critically analyze classroom and school environments using research-based approaches to equity, diversity, and social justice
• To foster collaboration between teachers and teacher candidates in developing curriculum and instruction informed by a heightened awareness of equity, diversity, and social justice

There is a heightened awareness across North America of the importance of teaching diverse learners in inclusive, democratic classrooms (Banks, et al., 2005). Increasingly, teachers and teacher candidates need to develop the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to implement curriculum and instructional practices that demonstrate sensitivity to issues of equity, diversity, and social justice (Gay, 2000).

Students and teachers at University of Toronto Schools (UTS), a culturally diverse Grade 7–12 school for students of high ability, identified equity and diversity issues as school priorities. There was an increasing recognition that individual efforts were insufficient to deal with these complex issues. An equity committee was established to begin the process of developing a school-wide response to unconscious, conscious, and institutional inequities.

The promotion of equity, diversity, and social justice is also one of the seven broad principles that underpin the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto (OISE) Initial Teacher Education program. This issue is central to the School and Society (SAS) course and a major theme in the Teacher Education Seminar (TES). Field-based interdisciplinary projects were already well established in one of our cohorts, Secondary Program 1 (SPI). In the year before this study, the field-based interdisciplinary project shifted to TES and SAS, with equity, diversity, and social justice emerging as central themes.

This school/ university partnership project emerged from a shared commitment to infusing equity work into teaching and teacher education.

STAGES OF THE PROJECT
■ STAGE ONE: Identifying Shared Needs
In May 2005, UTS expressed an interest in becoming more involved in teacher education at OISE. Around the same time, the UTS Equity Committee was seeking to heighten awareness of equity issues. In conversations with SPI instructors, it became clear that their concern with equity was congruent with the increased emphasis on equity issues at OISE. A proposal was developed around three themes: 1) research on equity needs at UTS; 2) the development of new and modified curriculum units developed by UTS teachers in collaboration with SPI teacher candidates; and 3) the development of resources for use in OISE’s teacher education program and in the school.

The team identified critical first steps for both teacher candidates and teachers. As a result, an equity facilitator skilled in linking equity issues to the personal identities of educators was hired. We hoped that this facilitated session would...
generate shared understandings and commitment. From this base, we planned to encourage the generation of meaningful equity projects by teachers and teacher candidates. Participants were encouraged to follow through on their initial interests. The partnership grant from OISE paid for the introductory workshops, while the UTS administration provided supply teacher coverage.

**STAGE TWO: Equity Workshops**

In September 2005, equity consultant Annemarie Schroer conducted three bias awareness workshops titled “From the Inside Out.” One was a full-day session for 14 teacher candidates at UTS and 20 UTS associate teachers. This was followed by two, two-hour sessions for the remaining 16 teacher candidates in SPI and for other teachers at UTS. Following the success of these workshops, UTS arranged an additional two, two-hour sessions for its teaching and office staff.

Participants were encouraged to reflect on their experiences and make empathetic connections to the experiences of individuals and groups who are different and, at times, marginalized in our schools and in society. The importance of recognizing and celebrating diversity, ensuring equitable treatment, and promoting social justice were then considered. In the full-day session, teachers and teacher candidates met in pairs or subject groups to begin planning ways of modifying curriculum and instruction to better address equity issues.

**STAGE THREE: Examining the School and Classroom Environment**

Teacher candidates in SPI voluntarily committed 10 days to classroom observation, in addition to the required 10-weeks of practica. Equity was one of the lenses through which they viewed the UTS classrooms during their field experiences.

At the same time, UTS teachers observed their own classes through an equity lens. In many cases, teachers and teacher candidates shared their observations and perceptions. Often, this informed practice during the practicum and beyond.

**STAGE FOUR: Teaching for Equity, Diversity, and Social Justice**

All OISE teacher candidates are required to take the School and Society course. The course explores schooling in a context of social, political, and economic forces and broader educational goals that have shifted over time. Among the topics explored are social class, sexuality, religion, gender, race, culture, and ethnicity. The application of equity principles in the classroom is also a core theme of TES.

For each issue, a group of four teacher candidates selects a topic and guides the class through an interactive, 50-minute seminar. They explore the historical and philosophical roots of the issue; how government and school system policies are shaping current discussions and practices; what is actually happening in the schools relevant to this issue; how research is informing/driving policy and practice; and how this knowledge can inform their future. Teacher candidates then write individual papers that fulfill course expectations in both SAS and TES.

**DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS**

- **Equity Workshops**

Before and after the full-day session, participants were asked to respond in writing to the following question: “What do you consider when preparing for a lesson?” The post-workshop responses revealed a heightened awareness of equity issues in 90 percent of participants. Generally, comments suggested that teachers and teacher candidates added several equity considerations to their lists. For example: “Who is not here?;” “How can I make sure all my students can access this material?;” “What unexamined biases do I have?;” and, “How do I get student input?”

- **Teacher Candidate Equity Projects**

The interdisciplinary equity project was the main source of data on the project’s impact on teacher candidates. Each teacher candidate was required to write a 2,000-word essay in which an equity issue was identified and analyzed within the context of a school in which a practicum experience is taking place/has taken place. The assignment asked the following of teacher candidates:

  a) Describe the setting in which the chosen issue is analyzed.
  b) Situate how the issue is addressed within the provincial/board level policies and local setting.
  c) Report, through observational techniques, how the issue is being addressed at a school level.
  d) Analyze the extent to which the issue is being addressed at a classroom level.
  e) State three recommendations for professional development for the staff.
  f) Reflect how, as a teacher in that school next September, this issue could be addressed in one of the courses they may be teaching.

- **Associate Teacher Reflections**

UTS teachers were encouraged to reflect in writing on their experiences as associate teachers and their progress towards developing more equitable classrooms.

**IMPACT**

- **Equity Workshop**

The “From the Inside Out” workshop was an effective introduction for teachers and teacher candidates to equity, diversity, and social justice issues. Initial defensiveness among participants quickly dissipated as the facilitator worked in a manner that was respectful
of the participants’ experiences and which encouraged them to draw on their experiences to understand better the experiences of others.

One associate teacher wrote, “I found Annemarie Schroer’s processes quite effective for acknowledging bias, while also providing a supportive framework for becoming proactive in trying to eliminate personal bias from curriculum and instruction.” The workshop prompted the teacher, together with his teacher candidate, to examine their experiences and consider the implications of institutional discrimination. Over the course of the first term, they examined their curriculum through an equity lens and developed new units of study.

- **Teachers**

  Teachers identified the equity partnership as an important initiative. UTS associate teachers reported feeling energized by new instructional strategies, fresh perspectives, and the appreciation shown by the teacher candidates.

  One teacher said he appreciated, “the opportunity to work collaboratively with a teacher candidate to perform a ‘gap analysis’ of my visual arts curriculum with an equity lens.” Together with his teacher candidate, he devised a framework for students to understand the concept of institutional and systemic discrimination. The support of administration, which was manifested in funding for supply teachers and additional professional development, was critical to facilitating progress towards equity goals.

- **Teacher Candidates**

  The assignments prepared by the teacher candidates reflected how participation in the Equity and Diversity workshops impacted on their current and future practices. They were aware that issues of diversity and voice need to be systematically integrated and addressed within curricular settings. Also, they cited strategies that could be used in a number of subject areas. All teacher candidates stressed the importance of following up on their experiences in the workshop with ongoing support and professional development.

  They observed that the road to equity is a long one and that much more work needs to be done. One teacher candidate stated, “Even those teachers who self-identified as gay or lesbian did not necessarily agree on how gay and lesbian issues should be addressed.” While policy may highlight good general directions, it may not be appropriate to every teacher’s repertoire.

  Others observed that the unique ethnocultural and religious conditions of each school must be taken into consideration. Some noted challenges that must be faced when community values come into conflict with equity policies.

  In addition, the group exploring teachers’ ethnocultural identities observed that creating awareness among the teachers is as important as creating awareness among the students. They felt this was an area in which they would need ongoing support through the professional development resources available through the Ministry of Education, the school boards, and Additional Qualification courses.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHER EDUCATION

The equity workshop has two implications for teacher education. First, opportunities for teacher educators to experience professional development alongside associate teachers strengthen relationships and foster connections to classroom contexts. Second, the workshop’s impact attests to the importance of foregrounding equity, diversity, and social justice in both university and school contexts.

The richness of the teacher candidate prospects attests to the importance of authentic equity assignments that link theory to policy to classroom practice. Most however, chose to focus on their first-term UTS experiences rather than their second-term experiences at other schools. This signals the importance of sequencing courses so that the rigorous study of theory and policy in SAS takes place in the same time frame as the workshop and practicum experience. We think that the impact of the workshop, practicum experiences, and OISE coursework would have been heightened if SAS had been timetabled in the first term.

### NEXT STEPS AND NEW QUESTIONS

The project was an initial step in a plan to promote equity, diversity, and social justice at UTS. Teachers’ recognition of difference and their commitment to alleviating inequities seemed to increase as a result of this project and the work of the equity committee. Still, we are “aware of the dangers of the mere acknowledging of difference without responding to difference” (Dei, 2003, p. 3). In the coming years, the equity agenda at UTS will shift towards responding more critically to differences and inequities.

### REFERENCES


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