

TEACHER POSITION, ACTION, & EQUITY



Welcome to Equity Digest! This newsletter is for education stakeholders (e.g. community members, caregivers) who have an interest in supporting educational equity in their school communities. What is educational equity? Educational equity can be defined as beliefs, actions, and policies that enable all students to have access to and participate in quality learning environments and experience successful outcomes. Each Equity Digest explains the concepts and findings of the latest academic research surrounding a particular equity-focused topic. The intent of this periodical is to relay equity concepts and supporting research, “digesting” key findings so you can draw informed conclusions. The Digest also offers ways that you can advance equitable practices in your school community. Enjoy!

Get Informed

Teachers are Powerful

With teachers organizing and having intense conversations around wages and resources, including recent walkouts in West Virginia, Arizona, Oklahoma, and more to come, understanding the history of teacher inequities, as well as teachers’ significant power and potential, is essential to understanding these conversations that are making headlines.

What you will find out in this issue is that teachers’ opportunities shift with social trends and politics. These shifts can impact the ways in which teachers interact with students, and the environment in which their students learn.

In this month’s Equity Digest, we discuss the unique position of teachers in classrooms and in society, take a closer look at the historical roots of teacher stereotypes and inequities, and discuss their role in change toward educational equity.

Why You Should Care

Teachers Can Bring Liberation

Teachers play a unique role in society; they provide a foundation and motivation for learning for all other professionals. With their distinctive position in the classroom and in society, teachers can directly impact the development of educational policy, as well as adapt that policy into practice inside their classrooms, directly affecting learning conditions for students (Coomer, Jackson, Dagli, Skelton, & Thorius, 2018). In this manner, teachers are powerfully positioned to be agents of social change within classrooms, schools, communities, and society.



Teachers Confront Beliefs, Policies, and Practices Fraught with Gender and Racial Inequities

Woman-dominated jobs pay less on average than those with higher proportions of men; additionally, studies have shown that these careers tend to enjoy less prestige (Rich, 2014). Although teaching was once a career for men, the fact that the current teaching force is mostly White and female (Taie & Goldring, 2017) started with roots in the Industrial Era (Grumet-Hobart & Colleges, 1981) into the Civil Rights Movement, and continues today.

Sexism and racism in our society have played out in the teaching profession, most significantly in the area of pay inequities that have persisted throughout history between professions traditionally filled by men and those by women. About 80 percent of all public school teachers are White; three-quarters of all teachers from

kindergarten to high school are women (“Institute for Women’s Policy Research,” n.d.). This has profoundly shaped inequities, particularly in terms of salary and work-related resources that teachers face in modern times.

Today, on average, women are paid 20 percent less than men (Institute for Women’s Policy Research, n.d.). When you break average earnings down by race, women of Color are paid as much as 46 percent less than White men (Institute for Women’s Policy Research, n.d.). Because teaching is a woman-dominated field, teaching is often viewed as “women’s work,” and not as important; therefore, regardless of the gender of the teacher, all teachers today are faced with this legacy (Gladwell, 2017).

In addition to sexism, racism has also played a role in shaping today’s teacher workforce and modern attitudes about school quality (Gladwell, 2017). Following the Civil War, the common school gained popularity among White teachers as a way to be a part of the middle and upper class (Grumet-Hobart & Colleges, 1981). In contrast, Black women teachers were paid a laborer wage, having to spend part of their salaries attending summer school by law (Fairclough, 2007). Thus, teaching was made a more attractive career for White women than Black women. Today, teachers of Color are underrepresented at all stages of the teacher workforce pipeline, from teacher education programs to differential employment rates (Center for American Progress, 2017).

Teachers are Mobilizing for Change

As teachers across the country resist the narrative that teaching is not a highly valued and valuable profession, and mobilize to protest the inequities they face, it is important to note that not only are they fighting for better wages, they are fighting for better learning conditions and quality resources for their

students. They care not only about themselves, but also their students and the school community, and, even more broadly, the communities in which they live. Teachers are fighting for “human rights, social justice, and democracy” (Alter, 2013, p. 13).

Moving Forward

Teachers Mobilize for Equity for Themselves and Their Students

Teachers are also changing the way they are viewed. While historically seen primarily as conveyors of knowledge—as conduits for transmitting information into the minds of children—in the 80s, education and policy scholars started to talk about a radical shift, viewing educators differently: as public intellectuals and co-constructors of knowledge alongside students (Giroux, 1994; Kincheloe, McLaren, Steinberg, & Monzo, 2011). This is a reconceptualization of what teaching is, which ultimately affects student learning by broadening learning goals beyond the technical and rote to learning as contextual, critical, and innovative (Giroux, 1994).

As teachers increasingly mobilize to fight for better resources in their schools, they also play a role in creating equitable contexts for their students. Students with raised awareness of social injustices are empowered to critique and challenge oppressive social conditions and actively work towards a more just society (Friere, 1970). By observing and taking part as teachers mobilize and fight for equitable pay and working conditions, students develop their own critical literacy, or the ability to criticize and make meaning of complex material (Giroux 1988; Kholi, Picower, Martinez, & Ortiz, 2015.)



Teachers Teach Students to Think for Themselves

Through teaching critical literacy, teachers also have the ability to direct their students to probe deep into historical imbalances of power, throughout history to modern times, and to think critically about their own position in society (Friere, 1970; Kincheloe et al, 2011). While teachers protest the inequities they face in the school community and beyond, they also instill in students the capacity to question the status quo and fight against societal inequities. Teachers are both actors and researchers in their educational systems, and are imparted with tremendous power to change those systems (Kincheloe et al, 2011). Contemporary teacher activism can also take social justice “beyond the workplace” and pursue justice around “larger themes such as human rights, social justice, and democracy” (Alter, 2013, p.13).

The (re)positioning of teachers as change agents and purveyors of critical literacy can shatter traditional notions of teacher roles, student achievement, and teacher quality, resulting in a higher value placed upon teachers, students, and our public education system as a whole (Coomer et al, 2018).



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About the Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center

The mission of the Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center is to ensure equity in student access to and participation in high quality, research-based education by expanding states' and school systems' capacity to provide robust, effective opportunities to learn for all students, regardless of and responsive to race, sex, and national origin, and to reduce disparities in educational outcomes among and between groups. The Equity by Design briefs series is intended to provide vital background information and action steps to support educators and other equity advocates as they work to create positive educational environments for all children. For more information, visit <http://www.greatlakesequity.org>.

Disclaimer

Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center is committed to the sharing of information regarding issues of equity in education. The contents of this practitioner brief were developed under a grant from the U.S. Department of Education (Grant S004D110021). However, these contents do not necessarily represent the policy of the Department of Education, and you should not assume endorsement by the federal government.

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