

Voices

Equity as a Mindset for Principals



Transforming Education through
Representation and Inclusivity

by

Dionte Jelks

Principal

SD 68 (Nanaimo-Ladysmith)

Equity in education is more than a policy, or a goal—it is a mindset that educators, especially Principals, must adopt to foster inclusive environments where all students can thrive. This article explores the significance of equity as a mindset, drawing on personal experiences, historical context, and practical strategies. It emphasizes the critical role of representation in media and education, and highlights actionable principles for Principals to create equitable and inclusive schools.

My journey from the southside of Chicago to British Columbia has been driven by a passion for equity in education, and a commitment to dismantling systemic barriers. As the Principal of Ladysmith Intermediate School in School District No. 68, I have witnessed firsthand the transformative power of an equity mindset. This outlook acknowledges that each student comes with unique circumstances, and it is designed to identify the exact resources and opportunities needed to achieve equal outcomes.

The phrase "seeing is believing" underscores the profound impact of representation on children's aspirations. When children see characters in TV shows, movies, and books who look like them and share their experiences, they begin to imagine new possibilities for their own lives. This concept is vital in education, where students' perceptions of success and potential are shaped by the diversity they encounter in their learning environments.

The excitement of a child seeing a person or movie character who looks and speaks like them cannot be overstated. My own son's reaction to seeing Spiderman "Miles Morales" exemplifies this. His joy could not be contained as he recognized a hero who mirrored his own identity. Similarly, the movie *Black Panther* inspired him to see himself as a future scientist, using his intellect to solve problems. These experiences highlight how media representation can influence children's self-perception and aspirations. What if our education system could do something similar?

Reflecting on my childhood, the lack of representation was starkly evident. I grew up attending church

regularly, often completing my homework on the public transit bus between Chicago's Westside and Southside. On one of these journeys, I asked my grandmother why the sidewalks were uneven and cracked. She explained they were remnants of riots following Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination. When we arrived at church that day, I questioned why all the angels in the paintings were white. My grandmother had no answer, and I was left wondering about my place in heaven if there were no black angels. These experiences illustrate the deep impact of representation and equity—or the lack thereof—on a child's sense of belonging and identity in our world and the education system.

"When children see characters in TV shows, movies, and books who look like them and share their experiences, they begin to imagine new possibilities for their own lives."

The landmark Supreme Court case, *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), declared racial segregation in public schools unconstitutional. This decision was a cornerstone of the civil rights movement in the United States, challenging the "separate but equal" doctrine and advocating for integrated schools. Despite this ruling, efforts to integrate schools continued into the 1980s and 1990s, revealing the persistent challenges of achieving true educational equity.

During my time at Hurley Elementary School, on the southwest side of Chicago, I was part of a federal government integration experiment. This involved a busing experiment to measure how black inner-city youth would succeed attending school in predominantly white middle class schools, and the

Robert Taylor housing experiment. The place where I was born and raised faced significant challenges due to severe overcrowding, with the complex housing more than 27,000 people despite being designed for only 11,000 residents. High unemployment rates and systemic poverty further exacerbated these issues, as residents had limited access to economic opportunities, social services, and education.

The “Projects” became notorious for high crime rates, including gang violence and drug trafficking. The buildings’ design, with long, dark corridors and minimal security measures, contributed to an unsafe environment. It felt like a prison instead of a home.

Chronic underfunding and mismanagement by the Chicago Housing Authority led to poor maintenance and deteriorating living conditions. Frequent elevator breakdowns, heating system failures, and delayed basic repairs further compromised the quality of life for residents.

Despite the challenges, I was fortunate to have exceptional teachers and administrators. One standout was Mr. Martin McGrath, a towering 6’7” Irish Catholic white man who pushed me beyond my perceived limits. His classroom was a haven of representation, adorned with images of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Michael Jordan, and other black icons. His unwavering belief in my potential transformed my academic journey, leading me from struggling student to honour roll achiever. Mr. McGrath understood equity before it became a catch phrase. If he was able to do this in the 1980s, what is holding us back in 2024? I believe that it is the confusion between equity and equality.

*"Equity and equality
are often used
interchangeably,
but they are
fundamentally different."*

Equity and equality are often used interchangeably, but they are fundamentally different. Equality involves giving everyone the same resources, while equity involves allocating resources based on individual needs to achieve equal outcomes. Understanding this distinction is crucial for educators who are aiming to create a fair and inclusive learning environment.

An equity mindset means meeting students where they are, and providing the necessary support to help them succeed. This approach acknowledges that students come from diverse backgrounds with varying needs and challenges. Achieving equity in BC schools – and schools across North America – has been fraught with challenges, including resource disparities and segregation. Despite these obstacles, educators with an equity mindset can still create environments where all students can thrive.

The Importance of an Equity Mindset for Principals

An equity mindset is essential for educators, and especially for Principals, as it empowers them to identify and address the systemic and structural barriers impacting students' success. By prioritizing equity, Principals can create more inclusive and supportive learning environments that cater to the diverse needs of their students. This approach helps in recognizing and dismantling the obstacles that prevent students from reaching their full potential.

Fostering inclusivity by valuing diverse perspectives is a cornerstone of an equity mindset. When educators celebrate and incorporate diversity into their teaching practices, all students feel represented and valued. This commitment to fairness, justice, and inclusivity is critical for creating a supportive and equitable learning environment. It is important to set the tone during the first week of school; don't wait for society to dictate what you will celebrate. At Ladysmith Intermediate School, we start every morning with, “We are Kind... We are Compassionate... We are LIS. Let's make it a Tiger Day because the choice is yours.” This simple phrase reminds every student and staff member how we will treat one another, despite our differences.

Considering diverse perspectives also leads to better decision-making and outcomes. Educators with an equity mindset are more likely to make informed decisions that benefit all students, thereby enhancing overall educational experiences. An environment that encourages diverse ideas fosters innovation and creativity. By promoting an equity mindset, educators can cultivate a culture where diverse perspectives are valued and respected, driving continuous improvement and excellence.

Another significant benefit of an equity mindset is reducing disparities in education. By providing equal opportunities and resources, Principals ensure that all students have the support they need to succeed, helping to bridge the gap between different student groups. By prioritizing equity, Principals can profoundly impact their schools, ensuring that every student has the chance to thrive.

Characteristics of an Equity Mindset for Principals

Valuing diversity is a fundamental aspect of an equity mindset. Embracing differences enhances decision-making and problem-solving, and educators with this mindset understand the importance of diversity in creating inclusive learning environments. Let's take a closer look at a few characteristics of an equity mindset.

First, promoting inclusivity is a key characteristic of an equity mindset. Creating an environment where everyone feels welcome and respected involves recognizing and addressing biases. This promotes self-awareness and humility among educators, ensuring that all students feel valued and supported. An equity mindset helps in identifying and dismantling barriers to inclusion, paving the way for a more equitable educational experience. This can be achieved by knowing your students and staff, understanding where they come from, and appreciating the unique gifts they bring to your school community. Seeking diverse perspectives is crucial. Including individuals from different backgrounds in decision-making processes ensures that a variety of viewpoints are considered, creating more inclusive

"First, promoting inclusivity is a key characteristic of an equity mindset. Creating an environment where everyone feels welcome and respected involves recognizing and addressing biases."

and equitable learning environments where all voices are heard and respected.

Challenging personal biases is essential for promoting equity. After reading Dr. Ibram X. Kendi's book, *How to Be an Antiracist*, I realized I needed to explore and work through my own personal biases. This insightful read helped me recognize and address my biases, which is crucial for creating an inclusive environment. By challenging stereotypes, I was able to foster a culture that celebrates diversity and promotes fairness, exemplified by the Anti-bias Mini Film Festival at LIS. This festival allowed everyone to watch videos and engage in open, candid conversations about racism, discrimination, togetherness, allyship, and empathy.

Empathy is imperative, both to teach and to learn in a school community. Understanding the experiences of others is essential for fostering inclusivity and equity. Educators who practice empathy strive to create supportive learning environments where every student feels understood and valued.

By embracing these characteristics and strategies, Principals can cultivate an equity mindset that promotes diversity, inclusivity, and fairness within

their schools, ensuring that every student has the opportunity to succeed, regardless of budget or neighborhood.

Benefits of an Equity Mindset for Principals

An equity mindset offers numerous benefits for school leaders, significantly enhancing decision-making by considering the diverse impacts on different groups, ensuring fair and inclusive outcomes. Leading with equity promotes better teamwork by fostering inclusivity and respect for diverse perspectives, leading to a collaborative and harmonious school environment. This mindset also drives increased innovation, encouraging creativity and new ways of problem-solving through the appreciation of diverse ideas. Moreover, a strong commitment to equity enhances a school's reputation, attracting loyalty and support from students, parents, and the community.

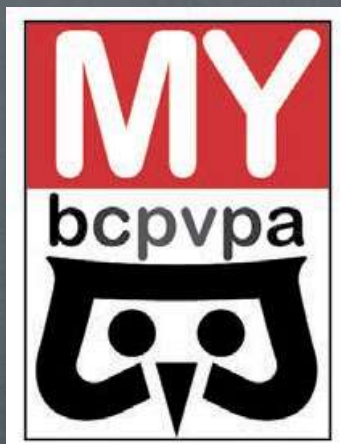
Call to Action

Here are a few calls to action to start promoting equity in education in your school community. These actions require intentional effort and a commitment to continuous improvement.

- Question our own assumptions and biases.
- Recognize and challenge harmful stereotypes.
- Reassess and adapt our practices to meet diverse needs.
- Take action to promote social justice in our communities.

Equity as a mindset requires commitment and action from educators, particularly Principals. By embracing the principles of representation, inclusivity, and empowerment, schools can create environments where all students feel seen, valued, and capable of achieving their fullest potential. The legacy of educators like Mr. McGrath serves as a powerful reminder of the transformative impact of believing in every student's potential. From the rough inner city of Chicago to beautiful BC, I am proof that Principals can make all the difference.

By embracing an equity mindset, we can create a more just and inclusive society where every student has the opportunity to succeed. Nelson Mandela once said, "Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world." Let us use this weapon wisely, ensuring it reaches all students, regardless of their starting point.



BCPVPA Members can find member news, information on member services and professional learning, contacts, resources, and so much more through My BCPVPA



Visit bcpvpa.org
and select My BCPVPA
Follow the instructions in
eNews to set up your account