EQUITABLE MINDSET: A TOOL TO PROMOTE INCLUSION

Dr. Jipsy Malhotra¹, Dr. Priyanka Singh Niranjan², Dr. Anshu Mathur³
¹Assistant Professor, Amity Institute of Education, Amity University, Uttar Pradesh, (AUUP)
²Assistant Professor, Amity Institute of Education, Amity University, Uttar Pradesh, (AUUP)
³Assistant Professor, Amity Institute of Education, Amity University, Uttar Pradesh, (AUUP)

ABSTRACT

An equity mindset is very important to ensure that all the students in the classroom feel valued, worthy, and included. A teacher with an equity mindset ensures that all the students in his/her classroom reach their highest potential, their individual needs are met and they receive a quality education. The students in an equitable classroom feel more positive, confident, engaged, and achieve high academic success. This research paper projects why equity is important in the classroom, what are the various forms of inequity, and finally the mindsets and practices teachers needs to inculcate to make their classroom equitable, positive, engaging, and inclusive.

Keywords: Equity, Equality, Inclusive Education, Quality Education, Equitable Mindset, Teaching practices, Inequity issues.

I. INTRODUCTION

Oprah Winfrey once said “For every one of us that succeeds, it’s because there is somebody out there to show you the way out. It is not imperative that the light has to be in your family, for me it was my teachers and school.” The life of a teacher is to make thousands of decisions every day – the content they must teach, planning for the sessions, what activities to assign to different students, how to give responses to various questions asked by the students, and most importantly how to meet the needs of the diverse range of students in the class. These everyday decisions taken by the teachers have a direct impact on the lives of the learners – in both good and ill manner. These decisions and their actions can either open new doors for them or cause ever-lasting harm; their interactions with the learners can either make them feel valued and important or can lessen their interest in school. This is the impact of the teacher on a student’s life.

When we talk about effective teaching strategies, we infer too much more than teachers standing in front of the class and delivering a lecture. They use various tools to assess and judge the understanding of the students and guide the students from where they are to where they need to be. Effective teachers put in efforts to organize various activities, research for materials and instructions to facilitate learning in the classroom, emphasizing the student's prior knowledge and experiences. Most importantly, the criteria which differentiate a teacher and a ‘good teacher’ is that a ‘good teacher’ adapts the curriculum according to the diverse needs of the students – for example making the content more accessible and using Equity to meet the students with special educational needs. They build up strong positive relationships with the students to create a healthier classroom environment that fosters the growth of the students academically as well as their social and emotional well-being. Finally, they create a strong, positive connection between the home and school so that students have the maximum support for learning.

If a teacher wants the students to achieve their highest potential, then there is a need for a shift of mindset from a one-size-fits-all to educational equity mindset. According to the research by to provide an equitable education, teachers and administrators need to embrace practices associated with education equity. He also suggested that these practices include student-centered learning, culturally responsive teaching, inclusion, and other actions that provide students the opportunity to learn based on what they know and the resources they need. “For teachers to embrace the practices of educational equity they need to understand and internalize the beliefs that all can learn, grow, and engage.” (Louis S. Nadelson, 2019)
II. EQUITY MINDSET

When we say the word ‘Equity’, it tends to give an indirect hint for the terms like diversity, accessibility, acceptability, equality, fairness, just, integration, and inclusion. In a simpler language, equity is defined as “the quality of being fair, just and impartial by having regards for people’s individual differences.” According to Nadelson.L.S.(2019) “equity in education means that personal or social circumstances such as gender, ethnic origin, or family background, are not obstacles to achieving educational potential (fairness) and that all individuals reach at least a basic minimum level of skills (inclusion)”. In an OECD Report titled ‘No More Failures’, equity in education can be seen through two dimensions: fairness and inclusion. According to the authors, “inclusion is to ensure that all students should reach at least a basic minimum level of competency. An education system with equitable culture is fair and inclusive that support their students to reach their highest learning potential, without either formally or informally barriers or lowering any expectations. Equity as fairness implies that personal or socioeconomic circumstances, such as gender, ethnic origin, or family background are not obstacles to educational success.” An equitable teacher sees each student in their class as an asset, as capable, and competent to learn different levels of content.

Equity should be in the prominence of a teacher's practice in a classroom. Access to resources and equity are the essential components of quality education. To inculcate these practices in the classroom, the teacher needs to have a strong equity mindset. An equity mindset consists of the values, perceptions, beliefs, thoughts, behaviors, and actions that emphasized students as 'assets than deficit', being more 'aware than avoidant', and understanding when the students need to have 'equity than equality'.

The teacher with a strong equity mindset carries out activities and strategies in the classroom that promotes more student engagement and emphasize classroom equity. According to the research done by Nadelson.L.S.(2019) and Tanner(2017), their practices and strategies include building positive relationships with the students, creating an inclusive classroom setup, culturally responsive teaching, student-centered teaching-learning methodology, understanding the needs of the students, and working and monitoring our own and the student's behavior in the classroom.

Background – Equity issues in India

Accessibility and equity have been a concern in the Indian education system. Many conditions still prevail in India, that deny students access to resources to achieve the goal of equity and quality education. In an equitable education setup, all students are not considered the same, they are being catered according to their differentiated needs. Instructions and resources are provided according to their individual needs so that the students can reach their full academic, social and emotional potential.

Although being a broad context, the researcher summarised and narrowed down the educational inequity issues in India with respect to inequity in terms of linguistic, case and class, sexual orientation, and gender inequity.

Linguistic Inequity

There are more than 300-400 languages in India, which makes India's linguistic diversity rank 4th in the world. Although India's multilingualism, cross-culture, and diversity is something we Indian's are proud of the other side of it is power and inequality. According to the research in Mohanty (2010), The speakers of minor and indigenous languages in India are multiplying disadvantaged; as a group they are mostly poor, belonging to rural and backward areas sharing many features of disadvantage. This contributes to the association of these languages with powerlessness and insufficiency. This discrimination against the minority, tribal and regional languages is evident in many spheres of the educational setting.

Caste and Class Inequity

Caste, Class, and socio-economic status can create a hindrance to equity in a classroom. A student belonging to an economically weaker section of society can have difficulty in access to the resources that could have helped them to succeed in their academics. Students belonging to a specific caste and class have been facing educational discrimination for many years such as the Dalits (the scheduled caste). They are among the least qualified and literate social groups in India and face poor schooling responses. The acceptability and learning opportunities for the Dalit children are addressed by the policymakers on papers, but to be fully implemented in schools.
Sexual orientation and Gender Inequity

To date, the acceptability of gay and lesbian students isn't evident in the schools. They are still bullied, made fun of, and harassed by their fellows because of their sexual preferences. The mindset of many educational settings hasn't evolved in this context, which has made the students of these sexual orientations stay isolated and hide who they truly are which can impact their academic, social, and emotional well-being. A safer environment is needed for them, to allow them to express their true potential.

Gender inequity is still prevailing in the classrooms with certain biases and stereotypes about the subject choices and career paths taken by girls. A stereotype that maths is easily done by boys than girls, engineering is more attainable by boys than boys or arts/teaching is for the girls and not boys, etc. Gender inequity can be combated by the teachers in the classrooms if they are more sensitive towards their actions and the impact it can have on students and most importantly speaking a gender-neutral language.

Teacher's beliefs, actions, and behaviors, as stated, have a huge impact on the students. Therefore, this research paper aims to convince educators to shift their mindsets to become more equitable and acceptable especially when the classrooms are becoming more diverse. This paper, therefore, suggests the mindsets and practices that an educator can inculcate to make their classroom more equitable, healthy, positive, and acceptable to foster the growth of the students emotionally, socially, mentally, and academically.

III. THE MINDSETS OF AN EQUITABLE EDUCATOR

As stated by the researcher above, an equity mindset is the belief, value, perception, action, and behavior of the teachers that promotes accessibility, fosters holistic growth, caters to the individual needs of the students, and builds a more inclusive and positive classroom setup. According to the research done the following are educator mindsets that should be inculcated to promote educational equity.

Equity vs Equality

Often after assessment, a teacher finds achievement gaps in the same classroom where they teach every child in the same manner, giving the same attention and using the same instrument. The teacher must realize that the reason for these achievement gaps can be due to the opportunity gaps and that leads to differences in the final educational outcomes.

As diversity increases in the classroom, some students are privileged to have a comfortable home, loving family, and easy access to resources whereas in the same classroom there are students who simply have either one or maybe none of these resources and privileges. There are many educators who through the test scores of the students assume the amount of effort they are putting in. They overemphasize the hard work and neglect the other circumstances, factors, and experiences that can affect the child mentally, socially, and emotionally, and hinder their growth and success even if they are working hard.

The question arises how can a teacher with an equity mindset foster the development of the student? As a teacher with an equity mindset takes into consideration the outside factors, circumstances, and privileges that can affect the learnings, success, and achievements of the students. A teacher with an equity mindset also considers that their methodology of teaching or the current curriculum approach might not satisfy or cater to the needs of the student and shift their approach, go an extra mile for them to provide additional support.

According to Rich (2020) explains that as teachers it might feel that we are giving extra advantage or chances to some students, but sometimes that is what is necessary as they lack the advantage from other spheres of life, to ensure that they also receive a quality education. As teachers, we need to build a classroom where the students don't receive the same support but rather the support that they individually need.

Asset vs Deficit Mindset

The one thing that the students need the most from their teachers is encouragement. Students from any walk of life, need positive reinforcement from their teachers, they need someone to believe in them, their capability, and even the hidden caliber that sometimes they're unaware of. A teacher who motivates their students creates a more positive and encouraging atmosphere in the classroom, where the students can try new things, step out of their comfort zone as they know their teacher is there to believe in them and support them. Justin (2020), where the teachers believe
in the student’s strength, capabilities, talents and treat them as assets that can lay a foundation for their success and development. The teachers recognize and build the hidden potential and strengths of each student in the classroom that encourages students higher-order thinking skills, creativity, physical or social skills.

**Aware vs Avoidant Mindset**

As the researcher mentioned previously that the student’s performance outcomes are not just based on the efforts that they put in, it is also affected by other factors like their accessibility, privileges, and most importantly acceptability. As the classroom gets diverse, many students are belonging to different caste, class, ethnicity, speaking different languages, and if they are not included in the class, their roots and belongings are not included and are not given importance then it will affect their overall performance. Especially in a classroom where there are minority groups, and students from various ethnicities, lack of inclusion, lack of their identity in the curriculum, can have a deep impact on the student. As stated by Rich (2020), a student will perform better when he is confident about his race, culture, and ethnicity and he feels welcomed.

Here comes the role of having an 'Aware Mindset', where the teacher is aware that the student's performance can be affected by his identity and background. The teacher with an aware mindset recognizes this and talks about the 'taboo' topics in the classroom such as race, caste, gender, sex, inequalities, discrimination, etc. The teacher needs to understand that these demographic differences impact the daily life of many students in the classroom and therefore for academic achievement and the student's social, emotional, and mental health, their identity and demographic should be kept central while framing instructional, curricular, and school-level policy.

**Teaching Practices and Strategies for an equitable classroom – Building a classroom where all students feel valued**

As teachers, we need to be very cautious about our actions, behaviors, and language as this can have a huge impact on our students. Teachers and school administration must realize that diversity and equity inclusion cannot be talked about once or twice in a year and forgotten after. It is a deliberate shift of mindset and a deliberate change in action. Teachers need to practice strategies such that every student in their class can reach his or her highest potential and has a feeling of being valued in the classroom. Following are some practices suggested by Nadelson.S.L.(2019) and Tanner (2017) that a teacher can inculcate to make their classrooms more engaging and equitable –

**Building a positive relationship with the students**

Research shows (Peter W. Cookson) that if a student is surrounded by positive relationships, they are more likely to achieve success in their academics and their life. This is more valuable for the students who belong from the vulnerable sections of the society and must face challenges in their daily life. School culture plays a very important role in shaping the achievement of the students. A teacher is a crucial contributor to the school culture, they need to create a relationship with the students of trust, care, and growth. They need to create a safe and supportive environment where the students can learn, make mistakes, and grow. Time, effort, and care put in by the teacher can have a great impact on student engagement and academic success.

**Building an inclusive classroom**

Studies have shown that students from various backgrounds, in a diverse classroom can face the feeling of exclusion, unwanted, being, and alien. The teacher here needs to act

where the students of different ethnicities, class, caste, or gender are welcomed and are included. As stated, before a student's performance and engagement in a classroom is highly affected by their feeling of inclusion, therefore it is important for a teacher and the school administration to frame the curriculum and activities that are relatable to all the students of various backgrounds.

**IV. CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE TEACHING-LEARNING**

When we talk about inclusive curriculum and inclusive teaching strategies, culturally responsive teaching is the methodology we need to incorporate. As the classroom is becoming more diverse in terms of ethnicity, caste, race, and culture, the teachers need to understand the impact and influence of this various cultural diversity on the student's learning. School culture, teacher's beliefs, perceptions, language, and curriculum all play a very important role to enhance this methodology. According to Nadelson.S.L.(2019) CRT is defined as a methodology of teaching where learning is made more relatable to ethically and culturally diverse students by using their cultural knowledge,

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prior experiences, perspectives, and characteristics. In CRT, a teacher needs to discuss the diverse range of topics and issues that cater to the daily life of the students such as class, culture, poverty, and other relevant topics.

**Student-centered teaching-learning with a collaborative approach**

In student-centered teaching-learning, the teacher takes up the role of a facilitator rather than the usual classroom setup. Here the students are the active participants, where they construct on search, knowledge.

The collaboration method of teaching is where the students in groups of big or small work together to do the tasks, learn, solve problems, and explore new concepts. This methodology of teaching not only enhances the learning of the students but in a diverse classroom, it gives exposure to the students of different perspectives, values, thinking, and beliefs. It makes them more patient, a better listener, and more acceptable towards diversity.

When a teacher uses these two approaches simultaneously where students are working with each other and the teacher is taking the role of a facilitator, it creates an environment where every student is provided with endless opportunity, where they can grow, take up any role they wish to, learn more, accept variety and most importantly feel included.

**V. CONCLUSION**

As teachers we have the power to make our classroom a safe learning environment where all the students are growing, reaching their highest potential in academic and other endeavors. Having an equity mindset for a teacher is very crucial to make the classroom more inclusive, engaging, and positive. We discussed that there is a deliberate effort required by the teachers to inculcate an equitable mindset and a shift in perspective from one size fits all to differentiated teaching, where students’ individual needs are met. An equitable mindset is about seeing outside factors such as privileges that can affect a student's performance. It is about encouraging and motivating students' caliber and capabilities. The road to equity teaching is a lifelong journey and there are many more teaching strategies and practices that can be used to make the classroom and the school more equitable. Hence, as teachers, we must encourage each other to discover and invent new methodology to achieve the goal of equity, inclusivity, and accessibility for all the students in our classroom.

**REFERENCES**


