

## **Facilitating Student Understandings of Equity and Social Justice through Guided Discussion Groups**

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### **Introduction**

In spring, 2022 I was selected as a Wisconsin Teaching fellow. Part of this year-long endeavor included undertaking a Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) project. I decided to align my research with other efforts in the School of Education to increase student understandings of equity and social justice, while also making a content-heavy class that I had inherited more discussion-based and engaging for students.

### **Overview of Project**

For this SoTL project, Students in the undergraduate course *Administration and Advocacy in Early Childhood* participated in peer-led group discussions. My goal was to facilitate inquiry, reflection, and equity-minded understandings of children and families in what McNair, Bensimon and Malcom-Piqueux (2020) describe as moving from “equity talk to equity walk” (p. 5).

Groups were assigned randomly. There were a total of six groups consisting of five members each. A significant element of this process was open discourse in a safe environment. Therefore, an initial task was for groups to develop norms of practice. Students were instructed to consider and discuss what expectations for participation would help them to function optimally as a group. Each group member signed the agreed-upon norms and turned them in as an assignment.

Participants completed a preassessment on their understandings of issues of bias and equity in pre-kindergarten settings, the role of countering bias and stereotypes among children, and their understanding of privilege. Students spent the next several weeks reading and discussing assigned articles featuring varied perspectives related to topics of social justice, bias and equity. The role of group facilitator rotated with each discussion. Facilitators were responsible for drafting 4-6 thoughtful discussion questions, intended to spark lively conversation. All group members were responsible for completing the reading prior to the discussion day.

One class period was set aside for each initial article discussion. Each group was assigned a different article to read and discuss. As part of the discussion, groups created an outline of their topic. In the subsequent class period students participated in a jigsaw activity. Groups were divided to form five new groups consisting of a representative of each of the primary discussion groups. Each student then shared the primary points of their reading and facilitated a mini discussion on their topic. Groups were directed to prepare 2 or 3 points that were of particular interest to the group to share out with the class at large. This entire process took place four times during the semester.

**At the end of this project:**

Students completed a post-assessment at the end of the project. Students articulated a much richer and more clearly defined description of their role in counteracting bias in their future classrooms. Pre-assessment responses were vague iterations of “I should try to advocate for students.” Post-assessment comments included themes of reflecting on personal biases and of being proactive by authentically incorporating diversity into the classroom.

Students conveyed a more assertive stance on advocacy that included speaking up in the face of bias, even with parents and administrators when necessary, and using the power of the ballot to vote for candidates who support equity measures.

Descriptions of privilege in the post-assessment encompassed the opportunities that most of the students possessed based on their backgrounds, and a recognition of what this might look like in their future classrooms, for them and for their students.

Post-surveys indicated that many students remained uncertain of the meaning of the term *cultural capital* and how this impacts the educational system, indicating a need to more explicitly reinforce this concept.

**Moving Forward**

I intend to complete this project again in the fall semester with a few adjustments, including more scaffolded discussion strategies, a larger group of students, and a more specific focus on issues specific to advocacy in early care and education.

**References**

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