[**Equity in class**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1739336/equity-in-class)

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NAME-CALLING, jokes targeted towards particular ethnicities, demeaning struggling kids by calling them ‘slow learners’ are all examples of rampant micro aggressions that are regarded as harmless jokes. Our education system is ‘not for the faint-hearted’ as a friend carelessly remarked, as if being able to tolerate dismissive comments is somehow a benchmark of courage in our society. Anyone deemed to be too sensitive to such remarks is not thick-skinned enough — sensitivity is a sign of weakness rather than emotional intelligence.

With International Women’s Day approaching, with its ‘embracing equity’ theme, one wonders where we can begin to scratch the surface of deeply embedded structural biases. Early childhood care and education would be a good place to start, except that the divide starts right there with teachers being more ‘tolerant’ of misdemeanours by boys and prone to letting them overstep boundaries easily. Girls, on the other hand, are expected to be compliant.

When we consider embracing equity, we may want to look at helping children think about it as an urgent need and perhaps draw up a school charter of concrete ways students can work towards it. A pledge by each child to change a little something, be it a perspective or a behavioural pattern, may be a good start towards teaching them to take ownership of their beliefs and actions. It may also be a chance to unlearn a few things.

When we talk of equity, rampant ageism comes to mind. Unlike other cultures, we are heavily biased towards those with experience. While experience is indeed a great teacher, it cannot be followed blindly in a world that is increasingly demanding new ways of working and being. When the young present opportunities for experimentation, experience must submit to innovation. We often fall back on ‘this has always worked for us’ as the rationale to avoid exploring new pathways. In school life, this has meant holding on to assessing students’ learning based on age-old expectations. The truth is, experience sometimes is a regressive teacher.

Economic disparity marginalises children.

If we are to think about equity in classrooms, all students deserve the same level of support, respect and care from their teachers, regardless of their gender, socioeconomic background or ability. Life lessons are learnt and mindsets are shaped in the formative years spent in classrooms, and teachers have more power than they imagine. Much of that power lies in the language used in classrooms. It can encourage or demotivate within seconds. It is not only the struggling students that are subjected to scathing remarks. Very often, the brighter ones — the eager beavers that always have their hand raised — are told ‘don’t act too smart’ (but why not?).

Economic disparity is another factor that marginalises children whose sense of belonging is compromised by their social background. In a country where a ‘big man’ is synonymous with ‘wealthy’, curriculum design would have to look at narratives in texts that often depict economic privilege as the only marker of success. Addressing inappropriate remarks about students’ backgrounds is one way teachers can ensure a culture of respect for all.

Another avenue to consider is giving a voice to students who hesitate to speak up. Encouraging personal responses, validating feelings and addressing difficulties gently should be prioritised over the race for grades. Equitable classroom practices have a direct bearing on academic performance across all school levels.

Whilst establishing behavioural expectations, many teachers overlook the need for diversity in opinion and the benefit of celebrating individual differences. Embracing equity begins with a decision to cultivate a just, inclusive and accepting environment for all children. Anyone, anywhere can take the initiative in small and significant ways. It doesn’t require resources but it needs a strong focus on change and a willingness to work consciously and consistently towards it — as early as kindergarten, when children begin to notice differences in hair and skin colour, physical abilities and emotional reactions.

Real-life examples from nature — fruit and trees — with their similarities and differences might be a good place to start. Interestingly, within the same school, there might be vast differences in classroom culture and very often that has to do with the strategic priorities of a teacher who has chosen to model equity and consciously maintained an equitable classroom. A reflective teacher would think about how gender neutral her comments are, how often everyone gets to participate in discussions and activities and how well the students interact with each other.

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