



Antiracist Multicultural Education Network of Ontario



“Achieving Equity in Education”

Equity in Education Today

Celebrating the 20th Anniversary of AMENO

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Member of the Equity Summit Group**

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**North York Civic Centre
Members Lounge and Council Chamber
5100 Yonge Street, Toronto**

Origins of Equity Summit Group

Over the past 3 years, AMENO has been attempting to regroup and re-focus its energies to once again become a voice, a supporter and an advocate to ensure equity and inclusion in the education of all students. The refocusing led to meetings with the Minister of Education and Ministry staff about inclusive education; and this 20th Anniversary celebration of our past, present and future involvement in inclusive education. As part of this process, AMENO fostered and supported the birth of the Equity Summit Group. This is the 3rd year that the ESG has been meeting and is a forum for Board equity personnel to share best practices and information to improve their local/regional efforts. The ESG meets four times a year and has approximately 35 members from 20 Boards (public and Catholic). The ESG has been instrumental in providing AMENO with critical and relevant information on the status of equity, human rights and anti-racism in the school system and an understanding of the impact on the diverse communities they serve.

Even though we have taken this step to organize and collaborate around equity issues, many challenges remain. And it is the information from the regular meetings of the ESG, the AMENO Equity Working and a mini survey that we conducted that informs the "Equity in Education Today" section of this panel presentation.

When the ESG was forming, calls were made to each of the Boards to connect with the 'equity' staff person. It was interesting that as the search went beyond the GTA, more descriptive language had to be used to identify a person who had equity responsibilities within the Board.

Some staff are specifically identified as equity officers or have 'equity' or 'diversity' as part of their title. Within the group, those staff who are specifically identified as 'equity officers' carry out a wide range of activities – staff development; resource development; consultation and support to schools and staff to integrate equity into all aspects of a board's activities; policy review, advocacy, community outreach and various other activities that support creating inclusive environments. Equity Officers may be full time, seconded or term positions and can be found in many departments across the Boards i.e. specific equity departments, curriculum, communications, staff development, human resources.

More often than not, however, the equity role is not identified by title, but as a function attached to an existing staff position such as:

- English Language Learner Consultant
- Secondary School Instructor
- Supervisory Officer
- Religion, Family Life and Equity Consultant

- Social Worker
- Administrator

While there is a wide variation in the type of work 'equity officers' can be performing at any Board, in the current climate staff who carry equity responsibilities also have primary responsibility for other critical educational functions such as:

- ESL K-12, International Education
- Newcomer Reception and Aboriginal Education
- Communications, Freedom of Information/Protection of Privacy, Media Relations, Crisis Communications, Policy Development, Records Management
- Teaching, Student Council Advisor and Safe Schools
- School Administration
- Curriculum oversight K-12 for Religion, Family Life and Equity. Faith Formation, Character Education, Compassionate Care.
- Direct psycho-social intervention to students and families and functioning as attendance counsellor.
- Curriculum-Literacy and Numeracy focus, Discipline ("Character Ed") Teacher growth and development, Parent (Community Relations)

Geographically, equity officers are not always easy to find; there is no consistency in the role. Equity Officers can be found in any one of a Board's major departments and work under varying contractual arrangements across several staff groups. In addition, equity officers may also be staff who carry primary responsibility for other critical educational functions. So in terms of 'Equity in Education Today', there is no consistent framework or structure of operation for the equity role.

Policy Status

Boards and equity personnel draw support and guidance for inclusive education from the *Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms*; the *Ontario Human Rights Code*; Ministry Program Policy Memoranda, Bill 212/Safe Schools and an array of internal policies.

Because of PPM119, all Boards in Ontario were legislated to develop and implement Race and Ethnocultural Equity Policies in the mid-'90's but our conversations have revealed that in many cases, these policies exist on paper but are not active. Although, Board activities as a service provider (education) and employer are covered by the *Ontario Human Rights Code*, not all Boards have an articulated Board human rights policy and even fewer Boards have employment equity policies or articulated equity goals.

Although, a few equity personnel are actively involved in developing and revising policies to support equity, others talk about gaps and inactivity Boards that are passive – "not in talk, but in action". There seems to be a great variation around the existence and status of 'equity'-related policies across the various boards.

Boards have an array of supporting documents/policies to support equity, diversity or inclusion. They take the form of policies, guidelines, foundation documents and memos. The following list represents only a sampling from a few Boards:

- Accessibility Policy
- Developing Inclusive Learning Environment
- Ensuring Student Success: Antiracism Indicators for an Antiracist School
- Accommodations documents
- Pastoral Guidelines to Assist Students of Same Sex Orientation
- Workplace Discrimination and Harassment Prevention Protocol
- Pastoral Care Policy
- Students of Same Sex Orientation
- Manifesting Encouraging & Respectful Environments
- The Future We Want: building an inclusive curriculum
- Faith Accommodation Guidelines
- Faith Forward
- Guidelines for Wearing Kirpans
- Equity & Diversity Policy
- Equitable Schools
- Equal Opportunity in Employment
- Code of Conduct
- Safe, Caring & Restorative Schools
- Second Language Programs
- Selection of Learning Resources

There also appears to be no shortage of programs that boards are using to address equity needs. Such programs are either specifically designed by the board to address internal needs or are established programs designed by others and offered as packages for the boards to use. The following represents a sampling of the types of programs:

- Tribes
- Roots of Empathy
- Special Education
- Tools for Tolerance
- Cultural Proficiency
- Virtues (Progressive discipline)
- Partnerships with Community social justice/equity agencies

- Newcomer Welcoming Centre
- Character Education
- Anti-bullying
- School/Board level Steering Committees
- PD designed for educators regarding equity, diversity, human rights or diversity
- Integrated Curricular subject and equity initiatives

This is but a small sampling of 'packaged' or locally developed programs that boards use to address their equity needs or issues. However, while discussions within the ESG revealed enthusiasm and support for the programs, there was also some concern expressed in terms of their effectiveness. Most PD for educators is offered after school, and workshops are attended by those individuals who already have expressed an interest in doing social justice work in their teaching practice or administration activities. Many educators who attend these workshops, continually query, how they can do the work in schools where there is little or no understanding or support for equity work.

There seems to be much talk about 'infusing' or 'embedding' equity or diversity into all aspects of the curriculum, but the reality falls short of the mark. Often the outcome of the desire to 'embed' equity means that equity becomes invisible and lost in the rhetoric. Some ESG members view board programs and efforts as being a 'checklist' for educators to tick off a box once PD or an activity has been completed. The programs do not appear to have a sustaining or transformative impact on the nature of education in making it more inclusive or equitable.

Cultural Proficiency seems to be the newest equity approach to be embraced by boards or staff within boards. And only time will tell if this is an approach that will gain prominence and acceptance as a viable approach or if it too will fall victim to 'the flavour of the month' syndrome and fade from view when there are no structural supports to sustain the initiative and/or the lead person moves out of the position. One respondent summed it up best by saying

I think that we must consider notions around whether or not systems, like boards of education, are effective in creating change and transformation in these areas. We need to understand that often they (the programs) ...centre around box-checking for administration at the school level (so we) come up with a plan but there is no need to actually put it in to place.

The critical gap regarding equity in the province is that there are no checks and balances or any true sense of accountability when it comes to putting these programs in place.

Comfort & Knowledge Level around Equity

Despite some of the positive things that Boards are doing to create equitable environments, equity personnel feel that senior management and administrators have limited knowledge and comfort or are somewhat knowledgeable or comfortable regarding equity.

It was felt that teachers are only slightly better because they have direct contact with students so there is more opportunity for the lived experiences of the students to shape them. But, for the most part they are *white, straight and middle class and so again there is no appreciation for how their own bias affects the course curriculum, delivery and attitudes around equity based issues*. Rarely do they know how to centre and celebrate diversity in their classrooms without these lived experiences and understanding of these issues.

For the most part, there does not appear to be any specific or consistent PD for support staff. It was felt that the support staff still function as gatekeepers when it comes to students and their families. They can deny access to services and create barriers for students and families who differ along the identities of race, class and sexual orientation.

The teachers and support staff who 'get it' are great. They learn and grow from their attempts to understand the dynamics of inclusion and what that should look like at all aspects of teaching practice. But they work in silos and are not always supported.

These are some of the discrepancies around comfort and knowledge that have been observed regarding equity:

- Some Boards have no designated equity position.
- Some high schools where diversity is high within the student population, there still seems to be a preference to hire only white teachers.
- There is not serious effort to make diversity a core value in high schools
- Teachers in grade school are still renaming students in with new "Canadian" names.
- Racism and discrimination around class are still the two major blocks for inclusivity and administration rarely, because of their own privilege and background, have any true understanding of these issues.
- There is an inverse relationship between vocalizations (creating inclusive environments and being equitable) and hiring practices not only in the teaching staff but also in support positions like social workers and counsellors. And training lags glaringly behind need.

- Senior management may know the right things to say but there is no consistency in what they will do or if their comfort level will allow them to act. They all respond when there is a specific human rights complaint and they have to act in a manner that is consistent with the requirements of a formal or informal settlement but in the absence of a complaint and where discretion is involved, inconsistency in outcomes does happen.

"Gently put, they know less than they think, and do less than that".

Implementation Level of Equity

When asked to rate the implementation level of equity in boards, most equity personnel described it as just beginning at their board or felt that the board was regularly applying inclusion principles. Some senior administrators are very supportive and open to new implementations but they need to know the direction and expectations. *"Overall, we have very committed personnel in our board and they want to do the right things. We need to see model of what a real equity plan looks like. We know what literacy and numeracy should look like".*

The theme of a model or frame of reference was repeated as a requirement to help boards with implementation. As well, there needs to be some level of external accountability so that when staff do write action plans, programs or develop resources, they do not get shelved to catch dust as the organization checks a box to document that the task has been completed. One clearly articulated position put forward that:

Principals need to lead this discussion (to create equitable environments) but all I see is a lot of one off speakers and moments in time that are not broadly connected to a serious action plan around creating equity in their schools and working to shift the culture and climate of schools. For this to happen there need to be more empowerment of diversity groups and people who are the true transformers of systems and schools - those who stay there. All current research tells us that transformation happens when people stay in the system for 20-40 years to consistently work on change. If principals change up every 4-7 years then how can serious change be effected for the long term when any new power base can, with a stroke of a pen, eliminate existing programs and redefine school cultures to suit their worldview and notions of power?

We often think we are further ahead, but the type of situations and complaints that come to light and general conversations with staff does not support that we are regularly or consistently applying principles of inclusion.

The Language of Equity/Diversity/Social Justice

Like any other area of study or work 'equity' has its own language and as such can be misunderstood, misapplied and used for unintended purposes. At the outset, we have heard the question – what is equity? What does it look like and how do we achieve it for students? Diversity, inclusion, social justice, anti oppression, anti racism and the isms. In our research, we found variation in the way that board's define three of the more commonly used terms equity, diversity and inclusion. For example:

Equity means:

- Equal pay for equal work.
- Equity of access to opportunity for all students and staff to create a foundation for success for all.
- Ensuring that all have what they need to fully participate in and contribute to the common good.
- Funding considerations
- Fairness and equity of outcomes
- Equality of access and outcome - as framed in the documents.
- All fairness work and often losses its real meaning in our board

Diversity means:

- Multi-ethnic, multi-cultural or in a "visual" difference, visible minorities
- Diversity of learning styles leading to differentiated instruction.(academic diversity)
- A box to check off - a recent diversity oriented poster featured 85% white kids, girls still in kilts and not one dark skinned individual.
- Diversity of culture, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, socio-economic status - that diversity means the many differences in our world
- A celebration of all persons as a unique creation of a loving God, each of whom has an inherent value.
- "All you diverse folk" = a synonym for non-white, i.e. excluding mainstream Anglo Canadians
- Diverse needs = special education.
- Diversity is intended to embrace all the identities of our students, staff and communities, but often gets actualized as racial, ethnic, faith diversity – culture

- The documents refer to diversity as a way of being where all communities have voice and can be a part of the decision making structure

Inclusion means:

- Special education only.
- Practice demonstrates a definition of ensuring that all are part of the fabric of the board and that inclusive practices are in places to provide opportunity for all
- All persons are celebrated as integral parts of the community and have their needs met.
- Respecting and welcoming all aspects of diversity.
- A more of a "nirvana" a lovely ideal without a clear path to making it happen

There is a wide variation in the use of the key words equity, diversity and inclusion and even with these key words, they have limited application and sometimes only get used within professional development or presentations. The other terms such as social justice, cultural proficiency do not have much currency within our Boards outside of the arena of equity workshops and there is active avoidance of phrases like anti racism or anti oppression because they make people uncomfortable – people challenge working under the title of 'anti' anything – it's too negative. The use and misuse of equity language is a barrier in moving forward with creating inclusive, respectful, safe and welcoming environments. We need to develop a common language and an understanding that will assist the educator/learner to move beyond a multicultural and 'safe' understanding of equity and diversity to a deeper comprehension of inclusion (exclusion).

Challenges to Achieving Equity Within Boards

Earlier, I indicated that equity personnel carry many responsibilities and can be found in various departments within our boards and across the Province. This poses some challenges for us, but when it comes to identifying what are the challenges to achieving equity in the boards, it is a definite asset to have equity personnel to be located throughout the board. There were many examples of challenges but in summary, they appeared to fall into 5 broad categories:

1. Lack of awareness

Equity personnel identified a lack of or no knowledge and understanding of the inequities that students and marginalized communities face within the educational system as a significant barrier.

As we struggle to challenge public perception about the changing and expanding understanding of what diversity means, educators push back with blockers like "that's the way it's always been done" or "we don't have any diversity here so we don't need to teach about it". The parent community also puts up blockers. It is okay to create a safe and respectful environment for their child – I actually expect and demand that you do - but I don't want my child learning about "others". Our colleagues in the Catholic Boards recognize the principles of equity and inclusion as core values that should be at the heart of Catholicity but, there is not enough education for students and teachers to get a core understanding of diversity/equity and how they play a role to develop or work against these values. So although, there is an increasing acceptance to expand awareness through a multicultural approach, there is less of a willingness to talk about the inequities as systemic barriers caused by ableism, ageism, classism, faith as an ism, homophobia, racism or sexism.

2. Working within a structure that is based upon power and privilege and therefore resistant to change or accepting new realities and perspectives

Equity personnel indicated that working within a predominantly White Anglo-Saxon staff is a challenge. Staff set the tone and culture within organizations, so that if they share a common set of values and beliefs and are unwilling, or resistant to accepting different perspectives, equity officers will struggle and marginalized students will continue to struggle and students in general will be ill-prepared to cope as citizens in a global world.

Our hiring has not met a threshold that would bring us to a level of representation that mirrors our student population and that of our communities. Further, there is little recognition or appropriate use of the 'diversity' talent that does exist within the boards. Students (and staff) continue to face discrimination in a structure where the nuances of privilege of a dominant culture manifest in board policies, practices and programs.

There is no time for sustained, deep and transformative dialogue around the tough questions that examine bias, power, and privilege. The assumptions, values and beliefs of educators have a significant impact of a student's learning, but our privilege still allows educators to opt out when a topic is challenging or past their comfort level

3. No common frame of reference or language

There is no clear definition of equity and many activities that educators, schools, boards and even equity personnel are engaged in do not challenge or transform education in a way that makes it equitable or inclusive. The lack of clarity around the language of equity causes a lot of confusion, misuse and again allows educators to pick and choose what they will accept as part of their responsibility to know. Again we need to develop a common language and an understanding that will assist the educator/learner to move beyond a multicultural and 'safe' understanding of equity and diversity to a deeper comprehension of inclusion (exclusion).

The move to character education and anti-bullying is seen as a soft approach to make equity more palatable. Many educators who do character education in their schools focus on the character traits and the development of social skills but do not challenge the students to think deeply about their own assumptions, values and beliefs. We do see good examples of character education programs but they incorporate not only a respect for positive character traits but also address the issues of marginality and exclusion based upon one's identity. When equity is not clearly articulated, educators lack confidence. They become more comfortable with tools, resources and programs. What they need to do is spend more time talking about equity, what it means to create an equitable environment and what as educators we need to do differently, because what we have been doing is not working for all students. This process may be supported by resources but it's success lies in the dialogue and creating a common understanding of what equity looks like and how to reach it for all students and that begins with looking at our own assumptions, values and beliefs around difference, success and the many other expectations we have of students.

4. Lack of commitment to the role of equity

As indicated earlier, there are very few dedicated full time equity positions across the Province. This is would not be a problem if our staff was more representative, if staff understood that diversity means more than cultural or racial difference; that equity is a concern for all boards regardless of size or location; and if staff were trained to be proactive around equity issues. But this is not the case. It appears that some equity personnel are positioned in the organizational structure in a way that allows them to bring an equity voice to the planning process. Yet other equity personnel seemed to be 'siloes' within their role with limited opportunities to contribute an equity perspective and in some cases are discouraged from doing so. Finally the legitimacy of the equity role is further minimized when most if not all equity PD is done outside of school time.

5. Lack of structure, accountability and staffing to support equity and its Implementation

Equity is not part of the strategic plans of all boards or reflected in school growth plans. Few boards have a system-wide mandate on equity or transparent expectations or accountability regarding the implementation or improvements around equity. Most boards do not collect data that would help to assess if marginalized students are improving or if environments are truly more equitable. Equity is not a priority issue for all boards. There is no political will or pressure, which often puts equity up against competing priorities, and there are no incentives to develop long term sustainable, coordinated approaches. This means that there is no real plan in place to shift the culture of the organization to create positive respectful learning environments for our students. There are no consistent attempts to respect equity as a valid curriculum concern or to move professional development to business groups and community groups. Even when programs or policies do come out that might move us towards a more inclusive environment, there is no requirement that it is enacted or remains active e.g. PPM 119 the Anti Racism and Ethno-Cultural Policy.

Recommendations for Professional Development

Our research and input from many meetings of the ESG indicates that there is a strong need for professional development that helps all staff to understand their power and privilege, the language, rights and responsibilities or equity as well as specific strategies. Running through all our discussions was the strong desire to see professional development around equitable and inclusive education be supported and funded as part of the work day and that it be made mandatory if not for all staff then at least for staff seeking promotion opportunities. Specific recommendations included:

1. Teachers need to understand the terms and issues and receive training to implement programs in their classroom. Administrators need to receive training to understand the terms and issues so that they can address issues of equity in their schools.
2. The dominant features of any professional development must be: 1) consistent – training and dialogue is ongoing, 2) universal - we all get the same training, and 3) contemporary - we are always being made aware of issues so that we are not playing catch up where inclusivity waters down anti-racism or we adhere to notions of equity that are from another era.
3. Professional development and training should address areas of awareness and advocacy experiences, cultural proficiency, restorative approaches to discipline, professional standard of ethics, faith formation and accommodation.

4. Administrators and teachers need specific strategies to respond to put downs (i.e. That's so gay). Staff need to be taught that some comments are just wrong and do nothing to create a welcoming, inclusive, safe or respectful environment. Overall, staff need to clearly understand and see that it is their responsibility to address issues, to be proactive and to respond to issues as they occur.
5. Although staff are looking for techniques and strategies; they must receive PD that allows them to have a discussion on power and privilege; the isms; their assumptions, values and beliefs so that they can begin to see how 'they' have a tremendous impact on the climate in the classroom/school and the 'success' of students. The 'Show Me How' or 'What Does it Look Like' is important but cannot be sustained if staff can not critically evaluate their own role and make changes.
6. Mandated deep training for **ALL** perspective administrators.
7. Curriculum based in-service (during school hours) around building an inclusive curriculum for their grade/subject area
8. Education about professional requirements, rights obligations etc. to build confidence and capacity to respond to community concerns when they are expressed.

Recommendations for Ministry of Education Support Regarding Equity Within the Boards of Education

Our research indicates that equity officers and staff carrying equity responsibilities have quite a few suggestions on how the Ministry can support equity. These cover all areas from staffing, professional development, structural and funding support; accountability and what it looks like at the Board/school/staff level. Many recommendations drew similarities and precedents from existing policies and programs created by the Ministry to address other educational needs. The following represents the recommendations that equity personnel and AMENO would like the Ministry to consider:

1. The development of an Equity Reference Group and an Equity Office within the Ministry to advise the Minister and department officials on integrating and applying equity and anti-racism analysis and content into current educational areas, e.g. Character Education, Safe Schools, Anti-Bullying, etc.
2. A provincial policy on equity similar to the provincial policy on English Language Learners, with clear expectations on what the Boards need to do.

3. Broaden the scope and application of PPM 119 by strengthening current and future school board equity initiatives with clear Ministry expectations, guidelines and resource materials.
4. A Ministry symposium on equity to address consistency around a common language, clear definitions and expectations as well as a provincial framework for what equity should look like at a board level, a school level and a classroom level across the province.
5. Equity and Human Rights must be stated as a core value and priority of the Ministry of Education.
6. Develop a common language and an understanding that will assist the educator/learner to move beyond a multicultural and 'safe' understanding of equity and diversity to a deeper comprehension of inclusion (exclusion). One of the existing models suggested, included the work of James A. Banks a multicultural educator, whose rubric is currently being used in some school boards in Ontario.
7. Make it mandatory that all Boards have an Equity Officer
8. Establish regular and consistent accountability around results and improvement regarding equitable and inclusive schools that requires all Boards to have goals or targets with give quarterly/yearly updates on what they are doing to address the issue.
9. Provide separate accountability bodies that ensure principals are not the final say in schools when it comes to equity issues but that room is made for those within the system to deliver the goods in a way that is prudent, celebratory and consistent so that institutions can actually change and shift.
10. Use a template similar to OFIP where schools are tracked on equity goals and boards are accountable to meet the goals they proclaim
11. Promote the inclusion of equity-based outcomes in current Board improvement plans in order to measure Board performance. These outcomes must be based on clear Ministerial directives that go beyond diversity and inclusion to focus on equity, access, human rights and anti-racism, sexism, homophobia, anti-hate, etc.
12. Provide funding that clearly supports equity as a valid staffing and programming priority
13. Provide direction and support boards to connect the dots re: safe schools, student achievement, equity, character development, restorative justice, bullying by naming discrimination clearly in communications.
14. Ministerial funding and leadership in professional development, curricula and equity resources to achieve understanding and effective application of equity, inclusion and human rights in schools.

15. Focus on teachers educating students or other peoples educating students in the system to better understand equity and diversity so that they can expect more from the system/society. There must be a means for students to demand equity and provide checks and balances up against a world of micro-aggressions they experience daily.
16. Provide the same financial support for this training as is provided for training in literacy and in the anti-bullying initiatives and in the Aboriginal education framework
17. Recognise and celebrate the work already being done.
18. Communicate the responsibilities and roles to teachers and administrators in a consistent way so with clear directions and expectations that the message ensuring that all Boards so that equitable and inclusive education is not just an issue for the GTA
19. The Ministry needs to develop a structure that builds and sustains a closer relationship with equity officers e.g. Periodic joint meetings called by Ministry of all equity officers
20. Engage school councils/parent involvement groups in equity and anti-discrimination education.
21. Create an interactive, current, live, well-organized e-site to enable educators to access resources thus enabling us to move past discussion of absence of resources and onto issues related to integrating diverse perspectives into the curriculum.

One of the recommendations for support, states that we need to recognize the work that has and is being done. As equity officers and personnel, we would not be in our positions but for the work of earlier champions who worked to make equity part of the considerations in meeting the educational needs of our students. Although, there have been many ups and downs over the last 20 years, the legacy of their work can be seen in our boards today – we do have some dedicated positions and where there are no positions, equity still gets addressed because educators know it is the right thing to do. We do have some excellent programs and the sharing that goes on in our ESG meetings is testament to the fact that equity staff today are having an impact. But we are also saying loudly and clearly that we need the Ministry and the Boards of Education to step up to the leadership role to ensure equity and inclusion in the education of all students because our children and our future deserve no less than your full commitment.

Cowardice asks the question: is it safe? Expediency asks the question: is it politic? Vanity asks the question: is it popular? But conscience asks the question: is it right? And there comes a time when one must take a position that is neither safe, nor politic, nor popular - but one must take it because it's right. - Martin Luther King Jr.