



What Jabari Taught Me: The Power of Engaging Students in Building an Equitable and Responsive Classroom Atmosphere

On December 4, 1992, I went to a workshop called “Failing at Fairness” facilitated by Myra and David Sadker (Sadker, 1992). The Sadkers’ work on gender equity in education was groundbreaking and much cited in the late 1980s, throughout the 1990s, and beyond. While they focused on gender inequities in the classroom, I believed there were strategies for undoing gender bias in education that would successfully address bias in the classroom in general. During this 1992 workshop, the facilitators shared a list of 13 pedagogies (see below) that facilitate an equitable learning environment. While all of these suggestions proved to be helpful, it is what happened the day after the workshop that taught me the most powerful lesson about equitable teaching practice.

One of the classes I taught during the 1992-1993 school year was a pre-calculus class for high school seniors. As most high school teachers know, December is the end of students’ effort in most classrooms, and in this particular class, I had already seen evidence of this trend. But Jabari hadn’t decreased his level of work because, since September, he had done none of the homework assignments. (All student names are pseudonyms to protect their identity.) Despite this lack of effort, Jabari was maintaining a C average on tests. This background information sets the stage for what happened in class the day after the Sadker workshop.

I began my pre-calculus lesson by sharing what I had learned the day before in the Sadkers’ gender equity workshop. I projected the “13 Ways to Create an Equitable Learning Environment” list onto the classroom screen and asked the students to evaluate my practice of these strategies. I was fairly confident that students would rank me highly as my pedagogy was grounded in the cooperative techniques developed by Roger and David Johnson (Johnson, Johnson, & Holubec, 1984), which enhanced the learning of students by purposely creating an environment that emphasized the responsibilities of the teacher and the students. I had an interest in addressing issues of equity for many years. However, I was surprised by what happened next.

“Code yourself,” number seven on the list, raised some questions from the students. I told them that the Sadkers suggested that colleagues watch each other teach and keep score of how equitable we were in our interactions with students. This score or “coding” was to focus on who the teacher called on in class and the quality

of interactions with each student. Were the questions or comments to some students more encouraging or critical than they were to others? Did the teacher communicate more interest in the learning of certain students? Did my interactions with students change depending on a particular demographic? However, colleague observation was problematic for two reasons. First, my colleagues were far too busy to sit in on my classes. Second, my colleagues would be evaluating my actions from their particular frame of reference, and it was more important that I learn what each of my students thought of the fairness of my interactions.

So I proposed that from then on, students should let me know when I did something that could be seen as inequitable. After a few more minutes of discussing the equitable practices listed on the chart, and finding students thought I did well with each item, I began the math lesson.

Not five minutes into the lesson, Jabari raised his hand. He said, “I don’t know if you want to hear this.” I encouraged him to go on, as I had asked for the feedback and I meant it. He continued by saying, “Jennifer asked you a question and you answered it, but Jason asked a question and you answered it, gave him an example, and asked him a question.”

“It could mean that I know what each student needs and I gave them each the appropriate feedback,” I said. “But what else could it mean?”

“It could mean that you care more about Jason learning it than Jennifer,” Jabari said. So I turned to Jennifer, gave an example related to her question, asked her a question, and moved on with the lesson.

I thought it was important to take Jabari’s comment at face value and not defend my differentiation of responses because my intention was to invite students’ perceptions and to be seen as responding in a way that improved equity. In addressing the damage done to cross-cultural relations by racism, the perception of a professor’s actions has at least as much effect on students’ willingness to engage as the professor’s intention. While differentiation in teaching helps to meet the needs of students in diverse environments, the unspoken interpretation of these pedagogical moves can cause great damage to students’ engagement in class. Taking the bold step to make these alternate interpretations vocal, and addressing the interpretations that are legitimized by our racialized past, can have a very positive impact on successful learning.

From that day forward, Jabari did all of the assigned homework

and got As on the remaining tests. I regret never debriefing with Jabari to learn why his behavior changed. I can only surmise that he cared about issues of racial inequity and wanted to work for a teacher who showed, by her actions, that she did too. This experience underlined the power of number six on the Sadkers' list: "Alert students to issues of equity." The power of engaging students in building an equitable and responsive classroom atmosphere may have a far-reaching, positive impact on their willingness to engage with the classwork and the professor who is creating that atmosphere. I believe this is what inspired Jabari to engage more fully in this class.

Asking for student input to increase equity has worked well in my suburban community college mathematics classes over the past decade. However, an additional systemic approach could broaden the reach of this work.

In an effort to create an equitable, engaged, and academically successful environment for a diverse population, a northeastern suburban community college opened the conversation about which practices are engaging for which students by implementing a collegewide survey. Members of the mathematics department developed a pilot, 36-question Likert scale survey that was administered during the spring semester of 2019. After IRB approval, the survey was distributed to developmental mathematics students. 482 responses were collected. All questions started with the phrase "I am encouraged to work hard by professors who..." with 36 different pedagogical approaches listed below as prompts. The students were then asked demographic questions about their gender, race/ethnicity, and religious beliefs.

The demographic questions were purposefully inclusive. The gender question did not just include "male" and "female," but other options including "trans male" and "trans female," as well as a "prefer not to answer" option and a space to write in any gender not covered by the choices provided. Race/ethnicity did not just ask about the major race categories (Latino, White, Asian, Black, etc.), but also included specific ethnicities and, in some cases, nationalities like Caribbean Indian and Korean. There was also a "prefer not to answer" option and a space to write in a race/ethnicity not covered by the provided choices. Likewise, religious beliefs had numerous options including Catholicism, Judaism, Islamism, non-religious, and spiritual. A "prefer not to answer" option was available, as well as a space to write in a religious belief not covered by the provided choices.

Once the survey responses were collected, members of the institutional research department analyzed the results. They stripped out all identifiable information (i.e., IP addresses, survey completion date, etc.), and the means were computed for the 36 Likert scale questions. To match a previous report done on a similar study conducted by the author at a different institution, results were disaggregated by self-identified genders, race/ethnicities, and religious beliefs to see if any patterns emerged that showed certain groups responded more positively (or more negatively) to certain teaching styles than others.

In order to do this analysis, an Independent Samples T-Test was conducted to compare means between test groups and control groups and test for statistical significance.

Test groups were groups that had a certain gender, race/ethnicity, or religious belief while the control group was the antithesis of these groups. For instance, the means for male students (174 respondents) were compared to non-male students (308 respondents) and the means for Latino students (170 respondents) were compared to the means for Non-Latino students (312 respondents). Not every group was tested because the study was limited to groups that had 20 or more respondents.

The top 12 pedagogies identified by students as encouraging their engagement are listed below with their mean scores:

I am encouraged to work hard by professors who clearly state how assignments will be graded. – 4.52
I am encouraged to work hard by professors who encourage students who are having trouble. – 4.49
I am encouraged to work hard by professors who are passionate about the material they teach. – 4.39
I am encouraged to work hard by professors who use humor in their teaching. – 4.34
I am encouraged to work hard by professors who make suggestions about how I can improve my work. – 4.33
I am encouraged to work hard by professors who allow students to retake tests and/or quizzes. – 4.33
I am encouraged to work hard by professors who break down large assignments into smaller steps. – 4.29
I am encouraged to work hard by professors who help me structure my work and study. – 4.28
I am encouraged to work hard by professors who allow students to resubmit essays and papers. – 4.27
I am encouraged to work hard by professors who provide virtual/online office hours for students. – 4.25
I am encouraged to work hard by professors who communicate that they believe in me and want me to do well. – 4.25

Differences of Opinion by Race and Ethnicity

Among these highest-ranked pedagogies, students from different racial groups noted different preferred methods.

Middle Eastern N=24	Non-Middle Eastern N=458	Statistical Significance Level
I am encouraged to work hard by professors who clearly state how assignments will be graded.		
4.23	4.53	0.043
Asian N=21	Non-Asian N=46	Statistical Significance Level

I am encouraged to work hard by professors who clearly state how assignments will be graded.		
4.76	4.50	0.017
I am encouraged to work hard by professors who provide virtual/online office hours for students.		
4.62	4.23	0.008
I am encouraged to work hard by professors who communicate that they believe in me and want me to do well.		
4.52	4.24	0.049
White North American N=65	Non-White North American N=417	Statistical Significance Level
I am encouraged to work hard by professors who allow students to re-submit essays and papers.		
4.45	4.24	0.028
Black Caribbean N = 22	Non-Black Caribbean N=460	Statistical Significance Level
I am encouraged to work hard by professors who allow students to re-submit essays and papers.		
3.81	4.29	0.012
Islamic N = 22	Non-Islamic N = 460	Statistical Significance Level
I am encouraged to work hard by professors who make suggestions about how I can improve my work.		
4.68	4.31	0.002
I am encouraged to work hard by professors who break down large assignments into smaller steps.		
4.65	4.28	0.004
I am encouraged to work hard by professors who help me structure my work and study.		
4.64	4.28	0.002

Above is just a snapshot of the survey results. Hopefully, other institutions of learning will find these equity initiatives worthy of duplication. This effort could be a professor-led endeavor or an institutionwide initiative. As a systemic practice, institutions can survey all community members (i.e., students, faculty, and staff) to learn what they believe to be effective pedagogical practices and to analyze the responses according to demographic parameters. Having an ongoing conversation guided by what is learned from the survey may also engage college students the way it engaged Jabari.

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References:

13 Ways to Create An Equitable Learning Environment

1. Increase wait time: Both between questions and naming a student and between naming a student and giving an answer.
2. Separate instruction from management: Do not use questioning techniques to control student behavior.
3. Intentionality: Be aware of communicating expectations and changes in behavior.
4. Class grouping: Think carefully about groupings of any kind in the classroom. Issues of perceived ability, race, and gender should be intentional and well-thought-through for the messages they transmit.
5. Collaborative learning: Social skills and accountability must be taught and reinforced in this learning technique.
6. Alert students to issues of equity: Students not only perceive different treatment but exaggerate the degree of differentiation that exists.
7. Code yourself: Or allow yourself to be coded by your students.
8. Don't rely on volunteers to answer in class.
9. Create strategies to involve all students: Poker chips, seating charts, quick response boards, cooperative work groups, and class discussion strategies (revoicing, paraphrasing, saying more, and sentence starters).
10. Individual meetings with some students or groups: Conversations with students about inappropriate behavior should not take up class time and should not be a public chastisement.
11. Teacher geographic mobility: How you position yourself in the room can communicate expectations to students.
12. Be sure teaching materials and displays in the classroom reflect all types of students in non-stereotypical pursuits.
13. Eliminate put-downs of all kinds: A safe learning environment is essential for the depth of learning that we desire to produce.

13 Ways to create an equitable learning environment is based on the work of Myra and David Sadker *Failing at Fairness*, and Thomas L. Good and Jere E. Brophy *Looking in classrooms*.

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