

Introduction

Open Minds to Equality reflects hope for equity and justice for all people. It also is grounded in the current reality of our schools and society. We have a vision of classrooms and schools that are communities where students and teachers feel secure and cared about and where all forms of diversity are respected and appreciated. Here people don't feel afraid or threatened by those different from themselves, rather they feel stimulated by new discoveries about diversity that they regularly make. These are democratic classrooms and schools where all students are treated fairly and have equitable access to resources and opportunities. We envision a similar society and believe that as students and teachers we have the potential to contribute to the creation of that society.

Given all that the media tell us is wrong with students, teachers, and schools, and given teachers' daily struggles with the difficulty of our jobs, such a vision may seem idealistic. Yet there are a myriad of classrooms and schools in which pieces of this vision are realities every day. Through the activities in *Open Minds to Equality*, we can put more and more of that vision into practice.

When we wrote the second edition of *Open Minds to Equality*, this challenge was far from easy. At the publication of this third edition, in a post-9/11, fear-ridden culture in which multicultural educators' work is complicated by the structure and constraints of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), this challenge is even more imposing. Many adults today fear perceived external threats to our society, are alienated from their work and mourn the loss of community. It's comforting to seek ideas and organizations that provide certainty and simple answers. People perceived as "other" are easily blamed, just as ideas that challenge a person's coherent worldview are easily feared. Young people imbibe the ideas and feelings of the adults and culture around them. To open their minds and hearts to equality necessitates our building classrooms and schools in which change is empowering, where work is meaningful, and where community is genuine. Then young people, teachers, and parents can know, through lived experience, that alternatives are possible to what society offers people today.

In such classroom and school communities, differences are named and appreciated. It takes hard intellectual and emotional work on the part of teachers and students to struggle with the feelings and ideas that keep us apart. Yet we know that elementary and middle school students can understand difficult issues that relate to equality and inequality, discrimination, power relations, and social justice. They need adults to provide safe space, language, and opportunities to talk about their lives, struggles, and visions. *Open Minds to Equality* offers a sequenced process, skills, and activities to empower students to understand and change their lives and the world around them.

Our Approach to Educating for Equality

We believe that for young people to truly appreciate diversity and understand democracy, our classrooms need to become places where students experience equality as part of their

daily lives. They explore how different forms of discrimination such as racism and sexism affect themselves and their peers, as well as consider how to change them.

At the same time, young people can learn about ways in which discrimination affects people different from themselves and how inequality is perpetuated societally. They can discover how people work together to promote social justice. Students' experience in classrooms where teachers and young people strive to create fair relationships and equitable structures enables them to envision what a just society could be. Such a vision is essential to maintain direction, energy, and hope as we collectively work for change.

Both classroom content and process are important for teaching about diversity and democracy. *Open Minds to Equality* explores many of the different forms of discrimination that inhibit equity. Young people as well as adults are affected by discrimination based on race, gender, class, age, physical/emotional/learning ability, sexual orientation, language, and religion, among others. These forms of difference are used to maintain social inequality. Through activities in this book, students will learn how this happens and also explore actions that could instead help change these unequal structures to foster greater social justice.

The content of the lessons also encourages students to be critical: to raise complex questions, explore different sources of information and various points of view, and to consider how knowledge can be constructed to maintain inequality. Lessons raise issues in a way that gets students thinking, rather than putting them on the defensive. In turn, activities encourage students to do the same when talking about these issues with others.

The lessons in *Open Minds to Equality* reflect a classroom process that is experiential, participatory, cooperative and democratic. Students explore their own experience as a source of learning about equality. If, for example, they are studying racism, they think about ways racism has affected their lives. In this way their learning is personally meaningful. It is also participatory: students work with others to share experiences, investigate problems, answer questions, and act for change.

Since competition maintains inequality and cooperation fosters equity, classroom norms are cooperative. Students are taught skills for communication, cooperation, and interpersonal understanding. The class may engage in a community meeting to solve a common problem. While only some lessons reflect a carefully structured cooperative learning format, most encourage students to cooperate with each other to learn. Finally, the learning process is democratic in that all voices and ideas are encouraged and differences are dealt with by listening, talking, and opening our minds and hearts to each other. We will describe in more detail our approach to educating for equality in Chapter 2.

A Sequential Process for Creating Inclusive Classrooms and Schools

From our teaching and research we have developed a "Sequential Process for Creating Inclusive Classrooms and Schools," a process through which people gain greater

understanding about personal and institutional inequality and develop the skills and commitment to foster change. The sequence of this book follows that process. Since dealing with diversity integrates both cognitive and affective learning, it is important to follow this sequential process, a process that engages people with the issues in a nonthreatening way rather than alienating them.

Step A. Create an Inclusive, Trusting Community Where Students Appreciate Diversity in the Classroom

Initially, a supportive, caring environment is needed for students to feel safe enough to examine their attitudes and to explore ideas that may challenge preconceived notions. It takes very intentional work on the part of a teacher to create that environment. Students need to be taught skills for working together, just as they are taught reading or math skills. Chapter 3, “Building Trust and Communication,” and Chapter 4, “Developing Skills for Creative Cooperation,” contain activities that develop trust, as well as skills in cooperation, decision-making, listening, critical thinking, interviewing and group work. When students feel secure, accepted, and respected by their teacher and peers, they will be most honest and willing to take risks to learn.

Step B. Enable Students to Empathize with Others’ Life Experiences and Explore Why and How Inequality Based on Difference Exists

Students need an opportunity to explore their own social identities and then to empathize with the life experiences of people different from themselves, something lessons in Chapter 5, “Expanding Our Vistas: Our Lives to Others’ Lives,” provide for. Words and language to name, define, and discuss inequality and its consequences are essential to students’ growing awareness. In Chapter 6, “New Words: New Eyes for Seeing,” students define and recognize prejudice, stereotypes, and the “isms.” In Chapter 7, “Discrimination: Prices and Choices,” they learn about the effects both individual and institutional inequality have on the lives and opportunities of people in various social groups. Here they also explore some of the complex dynamics of a system of oppression.

Step C. Help Students Examine Discrimination in the Institutions in Their Lives and See How It Has Affected Them

Once students understand these ideas they can apply them directly to their own lives. Chapter 8, “Investigating Your Environment,” and Chapter 9, “More Environmental Influences and Their Effects,” use the family, school, and community as a laboratory for students to investigate how inequality is institutionalized. Students develop a critical awareness of the institutions they’re a part of and discover the ways in which prejudice and the “isms” affect them daily.

Step D. Empower Students to Envision and Create Changes to Foster Greater Equality

By now, students have been building the knowledge and motivation to act for change. Chapter 10, “Things Can Be Different,” shows students realistic ways people have fostered equality in the past and continue to do so. The final chapter, “We Can Make Changes!” contains resources and activities that enable students to change unequal situations and promote social justice in developmentally appropriate ways. Students who have identified sexism in their reading books, for example, write and illustrate alternative stories. This activity encourages them to act against sexism and develops their skills in creative writing and art. So often we hear, “You just can’t change things.” Through activities that point out what others have done to foster social justice and through their own initiative, students gain self-confidence, personal power, and experience in collective responsibility and action.

Thus the activities in *Open Minds to Equality* help students progress developmentally and sequentially in their understanding of inequality and in their ability to foster change. This same sequenced process can be applied to learners of all ages, including ourselves, as we explore issues of diversity and democracy in our personal and professional lives. Even though there are key ideas, themes, and information that we expect students will learn, students in different schools and communities will have different experiences doing the activities. We encourage you to be flexible in adapting the lessons to your classroom and community context.

The way you implement lessons, as well as the outcome, will differ depending your social group memberships and those of your students. The demographics of your school and community will also play a role. A social justice approach to education, as described more fully in Chapter 2, enables you and your students to think about how various aspects of your social identity—race, gender, class, age, religion, sexual orientation, language, and physical/emotional/learning ability—shape the way you see the world, as well as how they provide you advantages or disadvantages in our society given its current structure. Our own life experience gives us some knowledge of the effects of social group membership, but never the full knowledge necessary for multicultural teaching. *Open Minds to Equality* will help broaden your perspectives in this regard.

As you implement lessons, be conscious of classroom demographics and the interplay of the various aspects of your own and your students’ social identities. If a majority of your students share a common aspect of social identity, you’ll want to be particularly thoughtful about those in the minority. For example, if you address race and racism in a predominately white class, avoid anyone expecting that students of color will be experts and looking to them for answers. Similarly, while you always will want to address biased statements that arise when students discuss these lessons, it is especially important to do so very intentionally when the comment affects an aspect of the social identities of students who are in the minority. If only a couple of students with gay or lesbian family members are in your class and other students make homophobic statements, your particularly active intervention to educate other students is important if your students with gay/lesbian family members are to feel safe in your classroom.

It's often difficult for us, and for students, to admit the benefits received from some aspects of our social identities and to push ourselves to explore our privilege. If you teach in a school that's middle class you may have to encourage yourself to engage issues related to social class and then be consistent in implementing activities about class that help students understand their privilege. Similarly it's often hard to address the interplay between privilege and oppression in our and students' own lives. Choose lessons from *Open Minds to Equality* that address some of these complexities that are reflected in your classroom dynamics. If, for example, males of color in your class bring an understanding of racism from their life experiences, appropriate lessons can help them see the connections between discrimination they've faced and sexual discrimination, which some of them may practice themselves. Thus when implementing these lessons, think about the social identities of yourself, your students, school staff, parents, and community and their implications for your teaching.

Using This Book

While *Open Minds to Equality* is geared for upper elementary and middle school students, it is very appropriate for high school students as well. In fact, primary, high school, and college teachers have used the first two editions of this book with great enthusiasm and success. These teachers often need to adapt lessons to the level of their students.

There are many ways to integrate *Open Minds to Equality* into your teaching. What is most important is that you teach chapters, and chapter sections within them, sequentially. Given that, you can choose learning activities appropriate for your students within the sequential chapters. Your choices may depend on the needs of your students, areas you believe are important to emphasize, school and community variables, the subject matter focus of a lesson, integration into your curriculum, or the difficulty of the concepts.

First read through this Introduction, Chapters 1 and 2 and the introduction to the other chapters; then skim through the lessons. This will give you a feeling for the progression of objectives and ideas in the book. If you are an elementary teacher and have students all day, you should find it possible to do one or two activities from each chapter section every week or two. When chosen carefully, these can reinforce the cognitive skills you are already teaching. If you are a middle school or high school teacher you can similarly integrate lessons into your curriculum, particularly in social studies, language arts/reading/English, health, or home and career skills. The book is also useful for special units or courses in multicultural education, human relations, and diversity awareness. For example, in one high school, students in a Peer Leadership elective experienced lessons in *Open Minds to Equality* and then taught them to students in classes in the district's elementary school.

While *Open Minds to Equality* is written to be used in the classroom, there are other ways teachers can use the book. Many middle schools have advisory or home base. By giving careful attention to the time frame and modifying lessons or teaching them over several days, teachers can make *Open Minds to Equality* the focus of their advisory for a year. In

fact, if the goal of an entire school is to encourage appreciation of diversity, this could be the program for all advisories. Similarly, these activities can be the focus of extracurricular multicultural clubs in schools and the programs of Ys, youth groups, camps, and other organizations.

This book focuses on various forms of diversity—race, gender, class, age, religion, physical and mental ability, sexual orientation, and language. We hope you will address them all. You may choose to emphasize particular aspects of diversity given the composition of your class and community and the needs of your students. The “Forms of Discrimination” chart in the Resource Section can help you find lessons that address particular types of diversity.

Open Minds to Equality includes some complex and sophisticated lessons. In fact, many are thought-provoking and challenging for adults as well as young people. These lessons are doable for young people whose teachers have been addressing multicultural issues with them over time. They would be inappropriate for teachers and young people just beginning to deal with diversity. The content of most activities is accessible to students from upper elementary grades upward, although some are more appropriate for those in middle school or high school. Therefore, choose lessons with an eye to their complexity and age-appropriateness.

The varying complexity of the lessons allows for *Open Minds to Equality* to be used across grade levels in a single school. If teachers in one grade teach the more basic concepts and lessons one year, still following the sequential process, other teachers in the next grade can build on that learning and teach more sophisticated ideas and lessons in the next year. In this way, ongoing awareness of issues of equality can be developed over time.

“Integrating Open Minds to Equality into Your Curriculum” in the Resource Section of the book includes many ways you can incorporate lessons from *Open Minds to Equality* into your standard curriculum, particularly in social studies, reading, language arts, math, and art. The activities in this book can both be integrated into your curriculum and can transform it. As you use this book, our hope is that you’ll find many creative ways to apply these concepts throughout the curriculum.

It’s important to remember that *Open Minds to Equality* brings a social justice perspective to teaching and learning that is more than a series of lessons. You can infuse much of what you typically do in the classroom with the spirit of this book. For example, you can give students spelling sentences that include the names and experiences of people from various cultural backgrounds. You can make sure that math problems include low-income people. When you line students up, you can have lines based on creative variables like sock color rather than gender. Such an ongoing approach in your classroom reflects a personal and professional commitment to equality.

Facing the Challenges

In many ways it is even more challenging today to create classrooms committed to equity and democracy than when we wrote the first edition of *Open Minds to Equality* in 1983 and the second in 1996. The post-9/11 atmosphere in the United States condones increased bias toward people of color, particularly Arabs and those of the Muslim faith, and policies of the government have increased the climate of fear. The growing strength of fundamentalism in various world religions—among them Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and Hinduism—has generated a greater reticence among some people to be open to those with differing beliefs. Political fundamentalism motivates increasing numbers of government officials, carrying with it the same unwillingness to listen to alternative perspectives or engage in dialogue. Such rigid political thinking makes its way into the consciousness of both the powerful and others. Young people are affected by the stereotypes, hate, and narrow thinking that pervade our culture.

The tenor of public speech in the media over the past 10 years has become more crass, with talk show hosts and callers alike using discriminatory language in ways that were less common in the past. Young people can easily come to believe that adults condone such language and the ideas the hateful words reflect. The mainstream media itself has become more consolidated, with a few corporations controlling the public's knowledge about our nation and the world. With fewer and fewer independent newspapers and radio and TV stations, there is less opportunity for alternative points of view to be heard.

Young people grow up thinking that what they see in the mainstream media is reality. Increased power and wealth in the hands of the few have also played out in the economy at large, where government policies have encouraged vast differences in wealth between the rich and all others. In fact, this gap is greater than it has been at any other time in the past 50 years. Economic globalization has expanded the profit system worldwide with oppressive consequences for the masses of people and for the environment. With examples of equity harder to find in our experience, it's tougher to teach about equality.

At the same time, these challenges have brought opportunities. In a post-9/11 world, you can join with those many multicultural teachers who have learned more about Arab people and about Islam, educating their students as well. With organized groups of immigrants speaking out for social justice, more educators are learning and teaching about immigrants, the realities of their lives, and the importance of a global perspective for seeking solutions to their problems. If you are concerned about the narrow and negative effect of the media on young people, you can become one of those educators teaching media literacy to your students so they can critique what they see and read themselves. Students analyze talk shows, critique the media for bias, and discuss the crucial role of responsible media in a democracy. With inequities, like government's response to Hurricane Katrina, looming large and hard to ignore, teachers are more able to help students pinpoint and analyze them and to support young people's desire to contribute to change.

One of the contexts in which multicultural educators now work is that of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), an educational agenda developed by government leaders and corporate executives with minimal input from educators. NCLB helped to bring into public view

the longstanding achievement gap—more appropriately named the “opportunity gap.” Our nation’s demographics are quickly changing. By 2050 the public schools in the United States will be 50 percent white, 25 percent Latino/a and the remainder a mixture of black, Asian-American, and Native-American.

This trend will increase the ever-growing divide between the increasing numbers of students of color and the overwhelmingly white teaching staff. Educators are eager to find approaches to effectively teach their increasingly diverse student populations, a need that *Open Minds to Equality* seeks to address. Yet our schools have not provided conditions to support equitable achievement for students of color, second language learners, and poor children. While NCLB shines a spotlight on achievement gaps, its solutions reinforce rather than rectify them.

NCLB’s overwhelming focus on raising test scores encourages “teaching to the test” and a narrowing of the curriculum, approaches contrary to developing broad, deep and complex understandings and the acquisition of democratic skills that multicultural education encourages. A rich, well-rounded education for all kids, one that goes far beyond test-driven standards to include multicultural competency as a “basic skill,” is something parents and communities increasingly want and need from schools. Schools with more diverse student populations have the most difficulty meeting NCLB’s arbitrary test targets and most quickly face counterproductive sanctions that don’t address their needs or challenges. Public monies are turned over to private tutoring companies, for example, rather than used for schoolwide improvements. In this constricting educational context, many educators find little institutional support for transforming the curriculum, employing equity pedagogies, and taking time for anti-bias education, all essential components of social justice education.

Despite this context, you can join the legions of committed educators who still keep education for diversity a priority in their classrooms and integrate ideas from *Open Minds to Equality* and other social justice resources into their teaching. Consider aligning with educators who speak up, often in the context of teacher groups or unions, to address the most significant reasons why children without privilege are left behind. While excellent teachers and schools can make a huge difference in the lives of young people, inadequate housing, nutrition, and health care are crucial to address if the achievement gap is to be closed, as are the alarming gaps in educational funding between wealthy and poorer districts. Articulate an alternative approach to educational equity that closes these gaps, that uses authentic educational accountability methods, that addresses both academic and social/democratic goals in ways that are encouraging and not punitive, and that invites parental/community involvement in schools. By teaching for diversity in your classroom and articulating this alternative approach broadly, you can collaborate with educators who push forward to make the potential of equity a realistic hope for all children.

Just look at all the active and committed educators, working both alone and together, to keep diversity education alive nationwide. You may already use materials from *Rethinking Schools*, *Teaching for Change*, *Teaching Tolerance*, the *Minority Student Achievement Network*, or *Facing History and Ourselves*. You may be a member of the

National Association for Multicultural Education or one of its regional affiliates. In some cities teachers have formed independent groups—Portland Area Rethinking Schools, Teachers 4 Social Justice in San Francisco, New York Collective of Radical Educators, and others—that offer conferences and develop curriculum, as well as organize around equity issues. You may already be one of the thousands of teachers who are actively working on issues of social justice in your national or local teacher union. There are many ways to join the excellent collaborative work that educators are engaged in to foster diversity and equity in our schools and society.

Teacher Learning

We hope that this book will be a rich source of learning for you as well. We learned immeasurably as we wrote it and tried lessons, so we expect you'll do the same. We've interspersed intriguing "boxes" of information and challenging ideas for teachers throughout the book. We hope the Background Reading for Teachers section in the Bibliography will spur you to read further.

If possible, try to teach *Open Minds to Equality* with support. Perhaps a colleague in your school will use it with you and you can give each other feedback, ideas, and support. When a number of teachers in a school or school district use *Open Minds to Equality*, we urge that you ask your district for staff development opportunities on teaching for diversity that will heighten teachers' own personal awareness and critical consciousness of multicultural issues. This, followed by periodic support groups or sessions where teachers can share successes, problems, and concerns is valuable for working through the challenging task of teaching about diversity.

In the process of using *Open Minds to Equality* you may come to realize you've been unintentionally reinforcing inequality in your teaching or life. Try to see this awareness as positive, in that only when a problem becomes visible can it be rectified. For example, only when a white teacher becomes aware that to talk about issues of race as a "black problem" is to avoid personal responsibility for white racism, can that teacher gain a new perspective from which to confront racism.

It is this kind of growth that we hope you'll look forward to in this book. Such learning is not always easy, but it is hopeful. Implicitly and explicitly we've been taught prejudice, and we've been socialized not to examine and challenge institutional practices that support inequality. This is not our fault. Once aware of those behaviors and practices, however, it becomes our responsibility to change them.

Change, not guilt, is the intent of *Open Minds to Equality*. Guilt is paralyzing. If we wallow in it, we don't do anything to change things. We encourage you to be aware of the messages you give yourself as you read this book. Instead of becoming guilty or defensive, try telling yourself, "I'm glad I'm aware of this; now I can change it!" That's a powerful statement—a step to becoming an ever more effective teacher.

Ideally, making changes in your classroom will increase your involvement in efforts to make changes in your school, your community, and the broader society. Such activity is important not only because of your own desire to promote social justice, but for the opportunities it can open to your students. Linking students with community activists and involving students with issues beyond the school can be empowering. It also reinforces the reality that social change is a collective process, often bringing diverse groups of people together to work toward common goals.

Our Vision

As teachers advocating personal and social change through education, we distinguish between long- and short-term goals. We share a vision of an equitable society where personal and institutional discrimination based on any form of difference has been eliminated and where people cooperate toward goals that benefit all. While we know that this vision is far from realized, it is important for us to know what we are striving toward. We formulate short-term goals, those small, day-to-day changes that are building blocks toward the future. *Open Minds to Equality* provides ideas and activities to achieve such short-term goals. The consequences of these efforts contribute to the broader vision of a just and equal society. We're encouraged that you're joining us.

Finally, let's keep hope! Paul Rogat Loeb writes in his book *The Impossible Will Take a While: A Citizen's Guide to Hope in a Time of Fear* that hope can provide ordinary people the courage and commitment to speak and act on their values, vital to maintaining a democracy in times of fear. "The antidote to paralysis is hope: defiant, resilient, persistent hope, no matter what the odds may be." By looking at the world with hope, we can sustain our lives with that orientation. "Nothing buoys the spirit and fosters hope like the knowledge that others faced equal or greater challenges in the past and continued on to bequeath us a better world," Loeb writes. We can become part of that legacy and carry it into the future.

— *Nancy Schniedewind and Ellen Davidson*