

# The Illusion of Equity PD

*Are our equity professional development initiatives really working, or do we just think they are?*

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In my roles as a teacher, school and district leader, and consultant, I've observed how diversity, equity, and inclusion training and professional development (PD) often fall into one of three categories: (1) equity PD that works; (2) equity PD that doesn't work; and (3) equity PD that looks like it works but doesn't. Equity PD that works helps effectively change educational practice to bring about more equitable outcomes for students. Equity PD that doesn't work leaves educators frustrated and unclear about how to make a positive impact.

But the third category is, in fact, the most dangerous, as it drains resources and creates a false sense of progress. Equity PD that *appears* to work is deceiving and counterproductive. It can receive rave reviews from participants, but leaves individual biases and systemic barriers unchanged.

To understand how PD experiences fall into these three categories, let's consider how the Dunning–Kruger Effect impacts cultural competence.

## Prejudiced and Unaware of It

Kruger and Dunning (1999) described an effect of being unskilled in a particular area and unaware of it. People who are less competent in an area tend to overestimate their abilities in that area. Their lack of metacognition impacts their ability to judge their competence and performance. Novice individuals are unable to assess their actual knowledge, because they don't know what they don't know. Thus, "they are left with the mistaken impression that they are doing just fine" (p. 30). For example, this pattern is often visible among novice drivers who overestimate their driving skills and experience significantly more car accidents.

In "Prejudiced and Unaware of It," West and Eaton (2019) showed how the Dunning–Kruger model affects racism and sexism. Their study revealed that participants with the highest levels of racial and gender bias reported the greatest underestimation of their prejudices. Similarly, in schools, some educators have low levels of cultural competence and limited awareness of students' cultural assets, yet perceive themselves to have high levels of knowledge because that understanding is either based on stereotypes or assumes that the educator's own cultural experience is universal to all. Limited awareness elevates perceived knowledge.

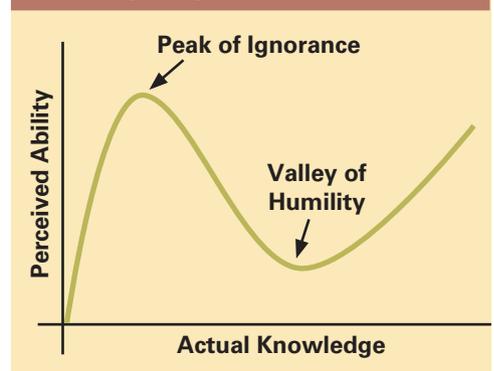
The hopeful news is that less competent individuals can gain insight by developing the metacognitive skills needed to more accurately assess their abilities (Kruger & Dunning, 1999). As Figure 1 shows, an increase of actual knowledge leads to a decrease of perceived ability—moving from the peak of ignorance to the valley of humility. This is where real growth in cultural competence can begin. Getting to this place of humility where one can recognize that assumptions and perceptions are illusions of expertise is a process that begins by exposing gaps in knowledge. Knowledge gaps are exposed and metacognition is developed when we move away from generalities ("I'm a great

driver") and examine specific skills or habits ("I'm good at parallel parking, but I have to admit that I need to stop checking my phone while driving"). When educators expose knowledge gaps related to understanding equity, they shift from saying, "I'm not biased against anyone," to insisting, "We need to examine our curriculum to ensure that diverse perspectives, cultures, and authors are represented."

## It Looks Like It Works, But It Doesn't

Equity PD experiences that give the false impression of effectiveness tend to provide participants with general information about diversity, inclusion, and cultural competence and then leave them at the peak of ignorance (see Figure 1). For example, this type of PD might define implicit bias, but does not prompt participants to examine their own biases. Participants take away a sense of being informed, but they have yet to reflect on their beliefs and practices. They may even leave the training excited, energized, and ready to claim their newfound expertise. Deceivingly, PD experiences in this category frequently score high marks on post-session surveys because participants self-assess their perceived knowledge gains and overestimate their actual competence. Educators are more likely to give rave reviews when they aren't challenged to confront how their actions uphold oppressive conditions or how their beliefs align with a deficit view of some learners and families. Equity PD that provides information without facilitating reflection creates a sense of accomplishment but fails to confront barriers to equity.

FIGURE 1. Graph of the Dunning–Kruger Effect



### **Stuck in the Valley of Humility**

Other professional development sessions can move participants from the peak of ignorance but leave them in the valley of humility. For example, some teachers may have become more knowledgeable about how they bring their own biases into the classroom or how the school marginalizes certain groups, but they are unclear about how to address these challenges. Some may be uncomfortable with examining their own identity and assumptions. Others will tire of talking about issues and feel frustrated by inaction. Getting stuck in the valley of humility leads to discontentment. The experience exposes knowledge gaps and helps participants recognize how much they don't know, but leaves them without next steps to move forward.

**Equity PD that appears to work is deceiving and counterproductive. It can receive rave reviews but leaves individual biases and systemic barriers unchanged.**

To be fair, many equity professional development initiatives that fall into this category were not designed to culminate in the valley of humility. These initiatives might have been cut short as participants struggled with their discomfort and questioned longstanding beliefs. Leaders may have felt pressure to prematurely terminate the initiative as staff expressed concerns. Whatever the case, to positively impact student outcomes, effective PD must move further along the Dunning–Kruger curve.

### **Equity PD that Works**

Effective equity professional learning guides participants along the entire graph, moving

from the valley of humility to an upward slope where perceived ability and actual knowledge positively correspond. This type of professional development ventures beyond defining concepts and questioning assumptions to guiding educators in applying specific practices in their context. West and Eaton (2019) determined that diversity training that delivers information about bias but does not provide techniques for reducing bias will not help an individual be less prejudiced or even more aware of their bias. Effective PD on bias and cultural competence goes beyond presenting general information and focuses on developing specific skills. For example, teams of educators can engage in a “How Might We” (HMW) questioning process to identify solutions for questions like: How might we identify bias in learning materials and classroom interactions? This HMW process may include guiding questions such as: What is our overarching goal? What are the challenges? What resources may inform this work? Who might have insight into this area? How can we gain a broader perspective? What are our next steps? As teachers engage in the questioning process, they are refining their ability to apply an anti-bias mindset and identifying a range of solutions that fit their context.

In addition, as educators apply strategies and skills, effective equity PD helps them reflect on the impact of their changes in practice. For example, if teachers are focused on identifying bias in learning materials and classroom interactions, they can document how they revised a unit or applied an equitable participation protocol. Then they can use brief student engagement surveys, like exit tickets, to gauge students' sense of inclusion and self-efficacy. Effective equity PD fosters a growth mindset among educators and includes structures to help teachers refine application until the changes become daily habits. The professional learning design also recognizes that teachers will vary in terms of where they are in the Dunning–Kruger curve, so there should be a range of PD supports (such as collaborative planning, resource libraries, instructional

coaching, or modeling examples) all focused on the goal of ensuring an equitable learning environment. Equity PD that works empowers school communities to answer the question: What does equity best practice look like *here*—in our classrooms, hallways, front offices, and meetings?

### Never-Ending Work

Effective equity PD takes time to move through the whole learning curve, and it is never-ending. Unlearning biased behaviors and building new culturally competent practices require dedication, time, and a commitment to continuous self-reflection and institutional examination. Leaders need to anticipate and ameliorate potential pushback by framing expectations (acknowledging the learning curve) and keeping the goal of student learning paramount as educators engage in challenging reflection and dialogue.

Most education systems are challenged with *inequity equilibrium*, a theory applied in school finance (Metzler, 2003). When disparities—such as curricula lacking in diversity or students of color being overidentified for special education placements and under-identified for talented and gifted programs—have been intentionally designed and then enabled to persist for extended periods, the state of inequity appears to be at the level of equilibrium. Effective challenges to redress inequities create a feeling of disequilibrium, especially for those whom the systems were designed to benefit. Equity work takes time to create a new sense of equilibrium by disrupting existing biases and resetting previous conventions.

How do we know if equity PD is effective? Evaluating this requires collecting evidence beyond self-reporting survey data. An equity workshop that presents general information and lacks critical reflection might have done little to increase competence but brought quite a boost to confidence. Thus, this type of generalized equity PD may garner positive post-session survey data from participants, because the typical PD evaluation tools measure satisfaction and perceived ability versus actual knowledge and professional action. To truly gauge effectiveness, evaluations should document evidence of application of specific practices and examine outcomes, such as changes in the curriculum to honor diverse perspectives, embedding classroom procedures and schoolwide processes for confronting micro- and macroaggressions, and appraising discipline policy and processes to address disproportionate suspension rates. The evidence

should show equity in action, or at least concrete steps toward more equitable outcomes.

A few questions to consider when planning equity PD are:

- Does the professional learning go beyond defining concepts and developing general awareness?
- What specific practices are PD participants able to apply as part of the professional learning journey?
- What evidence will be documented to measure progress toward more equitable outcomes?

If school communities are committed to achieving inclusive and equitable learning environments, they must resist the pull of premature confidence, sustain their efforts and resilience through the valley of humility, and apply concrete practices to challenge biases and barriers until equity best practice becomes an integral part of their classrooms, hallways, front offices, and boardrooms. [↗](#)

### References

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### REFLECT & DISCUSS

Have you experienced professional learning that appeared to be effective, but actually wasn't? What might've been done to push that learning further?

What questions will you ask the next time you are planning PD or participating in PD to help ensure the learning is effective and useful?

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