Sparking Change: Equity Initiatives in a Liberal Arts Charter School

Introduction

Change takes time, and initiating change can be risky. In our own classroom, when we seek to change classroom behavior and culture, we do not expect it to happen overnight. We find allies in students, notice positive actions, and consider underlying reasons for poor behavior. We have countless conversations and make progress in small steps. Addressing the hidden systemic inequities in our schools is similar. There is no one right way to improve classroom culture or systemic inequity, and it often happens that, in both cases, the hardest thing to do is start. The following is our story of the first small steps toward equity that we supported in our school, Arete Preparatory Academy, a small liberal arts charter school in Arizona. The school, which emphasizes a classical Great Books curriculum, serves a middle-class suburban community.

Why I care and how I became involved: Katie's story

After my third year of teaching, I decided to pursue a master's degree in educational leadership. I had only worked at one school in my teaching career—for a paltry three years at that—and I longed for a broader understanding of the American educational system and the challenges facing it. My studies opened my

eyes to structural inequities in the education system, and the complex ways they relate to pervasive inequality in American society. Schools are tasked with so many duties and challenges, but among the most important is the urgent need to achieve equity in the classroom. After completing my master's degree, I returned to Arete because I saw a unique opportunity to start a conversation about equity. I was excited, then, when the teacher in charge of clubs asked me to start a diversity club the summer before I returned to teach. It is important to note that the drive for the club was student-led. The previous year, a group of students voiced a need for a forum to discuss their own sexual and gender identities. Unfortunately, a club like Gay-Straight Alliance was not permitted; leaders at the charter network believed it would be too politicized and controversial. After meeting informally for a year, the students decided to find a way to exist as a club so that they could engage other members of the school community in their discussions. Socius Club, whose name is described below, emerged from this original group of students who were determined to create a space to discuss their identities.

Meanwhile, Ian had also been thinking about the need for an equity-based club; when we realized we were both interested in the enterprise, we decided to team up and lead it together. We met with the group of students that were interested in starting the club, and we came up with the following mission statement: "Socius is a safe place for all students who wish to strive toward understanding all forms of diversity, and who are ready to appreciate and discuss the diverse perspectives and experiences of all people. Together, we will discuss equality, tolerance, and inclusion, and advocate for a greater understanding of these principles in the world around us."

We thought that the focus on shared stories, rather than on a particular identity group, would signal that all were welcome to attend. The club's existence was met with skepticism and even hostility by some members of the community; I found myself feeling a need to prove that the club was not exclusive, that our conversations were not secret, and that we were not pushing a political agenda. At the same time, I lamented the fact that the safe space the students had enjoyed

the year before, when they were not yet a club, would disappear. I was glad that they were willing to open up this space to others, but the fact that they had to sacrifice their supportive environment felt problematic.

Why I care and how I became involved: Ian's story

Early in my teaching career, I read *Still Failing at Fairness: How Gender Bias Cheats Girls and Boys in School and What We Can Do About It* by David and Myra Sadker and Karen R. Zittleman (2009). At the time I was reading about the subtle ways we fail at fairness, I was a long-term substitute teacher with my first full load of classes. As I read about the types of feedback we give girls versus boys ("nice handwriting" versus "creative idea") or who gets the majority of our attention (the disruptive boys), I realized I implicitly and unknowingly supported inequity of instruction based on gender. This surprised me and hurt me, so I decided to try to gain some awareness.

Over the next two years, I taught the highest level math classes in a STEM-focused school in Colorado. Girls in these classes were a minority. In some classes, including honors courses of algebra 2 and pre-calculus as well as AP Calculus, I had only a single female student per section. The young ladies in these classes taught me much about teaching. Through them I learned that I care deeply about equity in education, especially in building awareness of all the subtle and hidden ways we make education unfair to groups of our students.

I moved to Arizona to teach at Arete, and after a year of teaching here, I was thinking about how I could engage colleagues and perhaps students in understanding the hidden inequities that exist in our school. When I found out about the interest in starting a diversity club, I immediately reached out to Katie to offer my assistance in any way I could.

Our school's context and curriculum

Arete's curriculum is based on the Great Books model. The Great Books theory of education was popularized in the 1920s by Mortimer Adler at the University of Chicago. In an age when many educational leaders believed schools were meant to train future laborers, Adler and his colleagues pushed for a common curriculum to train freethinkers. In a Great Books—or classical—curriculum, students read a

standard canon of books that includes philosophy and literature from throughout Western European and American history.[1]

One of the most important tools for achieving equity in the classroom is dialogue that promotes empathy between individuals from diverse backgrounds.

In addition to a specific set of content, the Great Books curriculum also includes a particular pedagogy: the Socratic seminar. Students discuss their learning with one another in regular seminars, with the teacher functioning as a facilitator rather than an expert. At Arete, we extend the Socratic format beyond the humanities. As much as possible, our math, science, language, and arts classes are also student-led and discussion-based.

In many ways, the Great Books curriculum is well-suited to equity initiatives. One of the most important tools for achieving equity in the classroom is dialogue that promotes empathy between individuals from diverse backgrounds. By sharing our experiences and identities, we increase our ability to understand one another. Understanding, in turn, allows us to break down the biases that form the backbone of structural inequality.

The Great Books curriculum encourages students to engage in deep, challenging discussions about big ideas. Students read about virtue in Plato and Aristotle and speak eloquently about the importance of pursuing goodness for its own sake. They know how to have complex conversations and how to challenge each other's views in a respectful way. They understand that, unlike debate, there is no single winner in a discussion; together, all participants strive to seek a higher level of understanding. In these ways, the conditions necessary for discussions about equity already existed at Arete. However, there was no forum in place to have these discussions.

The curriculum mandated that our conversations remain rooted in the text. Students had been instructed from middle school not to include personal examples

or anecdotes in their comments. Such details might make others in the group unable to relate to personal anecdotes, detracting from the ultimate goal of shared understanding.

This rule was well-intentioned; it encouraged the students to draw their evidence from a pool of shared knowledge—i.e., the books they all had read. In a way, it was meant to promote equity by ensuring all students had access to the same information and were equally prepared for discussions. However, it meant a missed opportunity for students to relate to the topics and each other in a personal way.

Our students shared that they wished to discuss current issues in the same ways they discussed philosophy, ethics, beauty, and other abstract topics in Humane Letters. Humane Letters is a two-hour seminar-style class in literature, history, and philosophy that every student takes for all four years of high school. The curriculum is strictly classical and, as such, does not include current events. Students told us that they wanted to unpack what they were learning through the news and through social media in the same ways they unpack the classics. The conditions necessary for a diversity club existed; the logical next step was speaking to interested students and having them spread the word to create momentum.

Starting Socius Club

To begin, we worked with students to decide on the name of the club. We knew the word “diversity” was a loaded word for many in our community, so we decided to call the club “Socius Club.” The Latin definition of “socius” is:

> sharing, joining in, partaking, united, associated, kindred, allied, fellow, common leagued, allied, confederate

We liked the name Socius because of its classical roots and its association with being an ally. We shared our excitement about the club with colleagues with whom we had strong relationships, and they were generally supportive and even expressed interest in attending.

We invited students we knew would be interested, posted fliers, made announcements, and started our weekly 45-minute Wednesday morning Socius

meetings. In our initial meeting, we discussed norms and wrote the mission we share above. Following meetings consisted of reading a short article about an issue for 15 minutes, then discussion for the remainder.

Our first issue, the discussion of which we teachers led, was *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (1954), and we included statistics about segregation in schools from Boston and Arizona. Soon after this first discussion, we received a charge to root our club discussions in classical material that aligned with our curriculum. Thus, we had to start each of our meetings with a classical reading about the topics our students wanted to discuss. Though this constraint was challenging, we found some excellent resources.

We kicked off a discussion on reparations for slavery with an article on reparations for Japanese internment camps. We drew on Mary Wollstonecraft to discuss gender inequity, Herodotus and Plato to discuss LGBTQ+ topics, and W. E. B. Du Bois to discuss racial identity and double consciousness (see the sources we used in our resource list). Students were generally engaged, but they expressed dislike for the need to read older works rather than directly tackle current issues.

Attendance through the fall averaged 15 students, mostly from 10th through 12th grades, and three to six teachers. When we invited teachers to attend personally, we found they were more likely to join us. Additional teachers expressed interest but struggled to attend the morning sessions due to other commitments. Our colleagues told us they enjoyed hearing about Socius conversations and the times we tried to address inequities in class. A few shared their own stories with us about how they addressed inequities in their classrooms.

In January of our first year, the attendance for Socius fell dramatically. Seniors were busy with senior theses; juniors and sophomores complained about the early

morning meetings, heavy homework loads, and exhaustion from playing sports. After a couple of meetings in February were attended by only one or two students, we put Socius on hiatus. We met with students to discuss changes to the club for the next school year, deciding to shift the focus from diversity to human rights. Additionally, we wanted to give students more opportunity to research topics and make connections kobetween what they see in the world today with key events and literature from the past.

Impacts of Socius Club on the community

Even though we were careful to draw on the classical canon, we experienced parental pushback. Some parents expressed concerns that the club was politicized and pushed an agenda that did not align with the mission of the school. For example, the mother of a student who had not attended the club called to say that clubs like this were inappropriate because “women in America had it good compared to women in some other countries.” She said there were women with fewer rights, women who couldn’t show their face in public, women who couldn’t drive, women who couldn’t go to school. She said women in America had no right to complain. Katie, who received this phone call, struggled to hear her out and, rather than argue, explained to the mother the club’s mission: to learn about others’ experiences and cultures.

Though more subdued, Socius also received positive support from families. We had one parent, who has a background of teaching equity at the university level, come in to lead a session of Socius. Another reached out for possible support working with youth in an intensive care unit. The challenge for us was recognizing the quiet support when faced with others’ loud concerns.

A concern some teachers shared was that the club could be divisive for our students. They worried that discussions of contemporary issues would polarize students and cause them to form cliques based on their identities or beliefs. Such a divide would then introduce negative energy into the classroom. This did in fact happen in one section of Humane Letters and posed a challenge for Katie.

On a brighter note, one of our colleagues shared a story about a young man in her class who made an inappropriate comment about people speaking Spanish in

America. Our colleague immediately told him his comment was inappropriate, choosing to address the issue in the moment. She told us that in the past she probably would have let the inappropriate comment slide because she was not comfortable addressing it. Now she felt encouraged by what we were doing in Socius Club.

Another positive outcome was when a colleague shared a concern about the lack of diversity on the senior thesis curriculum. He noted that nearly all of the authors—as well as the main characters—in the books our seniors read were male. This led to a discussion on opportunities to include more female voices in the curriculum and ultimately led us to switch out one of the books and replace it with a novel by a female author.

A book discussion and two visiting professors

The second year of the club's existence coincided with two additional equity measures at our school. First, the administration chose the book Claude Steele's *Whistling Vivaldi* (2011) as our professional development text for the year. Steele discusses stereotype threat and the ways that institutions, especially schools, can defeat it to achieve equity. Throughout the first semester, teachers met in small groups after our Wednesday faculty meetings to discuss the book. For many, it was the first time they had encountered this subject matter. Others had thought about it deeply and shared their personal experiences with stereotype and bias. Teacher reactions to these conversations ranged from hesitation to excitement and a hunger to apply strategies from the book immediately to make classrooms more equitable. Several groups had frank discussions about the implicit messages sent by our curriculum, our language, even the art on our walls. When the discussion series finished, many teachers wanted to know how we could continue to practice and improve the strategies we discussed.

Second, in September our school hosted two professors who study equity in the math classroom. The professors observed classes, met with a focus group of students, and gave a presentation to the student body that broadly defined the meaning of equity. Afterwards, they presented their research to the faculty and shared some of the things they had noticed about Arete after spending the day

with us.

We are each other’s best resources and allies in the pursuit of positive change.

Our faculty seemed excited by the research the professors shared, especially their focus on “rigor, relevance, and relationships.” The room was abuzz as teachers discussed closing gaps between their students and creating innovative opportunities for success. The professors commended the efforts of our passionate, caring teachers and lauded our students’ love of learning.

However, when the professors held up the mirror and presented their findings from the focus group, the mood in the room shifted noticeably.

The focus group had consisted of students from varied grades pulled from classes to share their experiences. Students raved about their classes, shared how much they enjoyed every class, specifically because of their teachers’ passions for the subjects and how much their teachers cared for them as individuals. The professors noted that all of the students who spoke were white; the students of color were silent. With 15 minutes remaining to speak with the students, the professors asked the white students to leave. Only then did the students of color speak. They shared that they did not feel included by our culture. They did not have adults on campus with whom they could relate. In class, they were less likely than their white peers to volunteer to share an idea or to try a problem.

Reactions to this information were varied. Many teachers were troubled and moved to action; they wanted to jump immediately to solutions. Others seemed skeptical of the link between the students’ race and their experience. Comments were made along the lines of, “I treat every student as an individual when they walk through my door. I do not make assumptions about their previous experiences.” It became clear that we did not share a common understanding of the problem—or even share the opinion that a problem existed. This particular conversation ended on a note of tension, but it was a healthy tension for us as a faculty. It was the first time we had ever spoken about race as a whole group.

The conversation that started that day in September has continued to pop up in

the faculty office in small ways throughout the year. At the lunch table, teachers began to share stories of times they had experienced bias or profiling. In pedagogy conversations, it was not unusual to hear teachers unpacking the unconscious ways that they treated their male and female students differently. These were topics that would not have been discussed in this setting a year earlier.

Moving forward

As these conversations were beginning amongst the faculty, we shifted the focus of Socius from diversity to human rights. Our hope was that this lens would allow us to examine more contemporary equity issues and attract a broader array of students to our meetings. In one of our first meetings of the year, we discussed the history of hate speech in America and applied it to the recent white supremacist march in Charlottesville. After that, we asked students to research human rights issues that interested them and create a presentation to share with the group. Many students started researching topics that ranged from depictions of women in the media to white privilege to bioethics.

However, many of these students did not finish their research or present their topics, and the attendance for Socius again fell dramatically in winter. As of this writing, we have a core group of three or four students who continue to show up consistently, with other students dropping in from time to time. Additionally, many of the club founders will graduate this spring, and it is unclear whether younger students will step forward to take on a leadership role. We will need to find new momentum and new student leadership. Despite this element of uncertainty, we are determined to continue to make Socius more visible and effective in our school community. Going forward, attendance and momentum are two issues we would like to focus on to make our club sustainable.

Throughout this process, we have discovered valuable action steps to increase equity within a school community. Using the momentum of students' requests to address identity-based issues they face in their daily life, we saw an opportunity to support our students and create positive change amongst our colleagues. We initiated small group discussion from the start of the club. We used the lessons learned from that experience to encourage deeper dialogue about racial inequality

in our own school, recognizing how students of color were experiencing our educational tactics differently. This final element—the reflecting back of all we have learned upon ourselves—has proven the most fruitful. By identifying the distance we still have to go to achieve equity, we feel our teachers and students have been able to highlight small steps that they can implement in pursuit of this goal.

As we continue to strive for equity, we also hope to engage other schools in dialogue so that we can learn from the experiences of educators across the nation. We are each other's best resources and allies in the pursuit of positive change.

Resources from classical curricula that address equity and human rights

Japanese internment camps:

National Park Service (1942). Determining the facts, document 1: "To all persons of Japanese
ancestry."Retrieved from
https://www.nps.gov/nr/twhp/wwwlps/lessons/89manzanar/89facts2.htm

Women's rights:

Wollstonecraft, M., & Ward, C. (1996). *A vindication of the rights of woman*. Mineola, NY:
Dover Publications.

LGBTQ:

Herodotus. (2003). *The histories*. New York: Penguin Books.

Plato. (1989). *Symposium*. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company.

Racial identity:

Du Bois, W. E.B. (1994). *The souls of black folk*. Mineola, NY: Dover Publications.

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Footnote

[1] The definition of a "Great Book" is a controversial topic that merits its own article. In the context of Adler's curriculum and the reading list at Arete, it refers to a text that is at least 50 years old and has been deemed important by several

generations of scholars.

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