# *Equal and Fair Are Not the Same: Classroom Issues of Fairness*

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Educational professionals frequently struggle with the concepts of fair and equal. With the increase in student diversity and the expectation for differentiated instruction, issues surrounding fairness are more evident than ever. Educational professionals often experience intrapersonal conflicts around issues of fairness. Fair and equal are certainly not the same thing, what is fair for one student may not be fair for another. The issues of fairness are complex, often the definition is not congruent, there are external factors that influence our interpretation of fairness, and educational professionals frequently do not establish conditions for fairness.

Duetsch (1975) provided three distinctly different definitions of fairness: equality, equity, and need. Equality by definition is treating everyone the same, and there are instances when this definition is applicable, such as everyone gets a vote. Equity suggests that consequences, both rewards and punishment are proportionate to product. An example of equity is all children are taught to write but the gifted poet is celebrated. The third definition is based on need. Accommodations and supports are provided, not to everyone (equality) or to only the best (equity), but to those that need them to be successful. To fully understand the issues of fairness, educational professionals must first understand these definitions.

Cultural, linguistic, and ability differences are factors that influence fairness in the classroom. Students come from varied background and have differing abilities. For example, students from more cooperative cultures will place a greater value on equality, while students from a more competitive culture understand equity as fair. These differences present challenges to educational professionals in their effort to create successful environments for all students. Enright and his colleagues (1984) identified the following developmental stages in understanding fairness:
1. The person who wants something the most should get it.
2. Decisions are based on external circumstances-it is fair to give something to the tallest or oldest person, etc.
3. Everyone should get the same amount.
4. The person who works the hardest should receive more.
5. The person who needs more should receive more.
6. Children realize the importance of both effort and need and seek a compromise between the two.

Welch (2000) offered the following "fair" strategies for teachers to use in the classroom:
- Reflect back the student's feelings – allow students to express their feelings and deal openly with the issue.
- Listen for other meanings – complaints often signal the student's need, it is less about what others receive but rather what the student needs.
- Offer something special – rather than trying to explain why one person gets something that others do not, make the reward available to all based on their individual skills and performance criteria.
- Respond to "it's not fair…" consistently and without explanation – justification is not needed, students will quickly learn from a consistent teacher response.
- Teach different types of fairness – students can easily relate to the concept of fairness when it applies to everyone.
- Provide a procedure for lodging complaints – students need to be able to discuss these issues.
- Develop a caring, cooperative classroom community.
- Provide, teach, and enforce school-wide procedures.
- Ensure the appropriate use of accommodations and supports for students.

The responsibility for addressing the issue of fairness is shared among families, educational professionals, and students. In order for students to have a more full understanding that fair does not always mean the same, we must teach and model this concept.

References

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