



*Rob Jagers*

*Rob Jagers has been working on issues of equity for 20 years, first at the University of Illinois-Chicago with CASEL Chief Knowledge Officer Roger Weissberg and most recently as a faculty member at the University of Michigan School of Education, where he has taught education and psychology for nine years. He also serves on the National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development's Council of Distinguished Scientists. He recently was named a Senior Research Fellow at CASEL, where he is helping the organization integrate equity into its work.*

### **Defining equity**

Like other big and amorphous terms that become popular, like social and emotional learning, “equity” can take on multiple meanings. I look at it mainly as a fundamental concern with fairness and justice. What is right and appropriate in any context for any particular group of people? How are valued goods and resources shared and distributed? How are high-quality educational experiences provided to *all* students as they need it and when they need it, regardless of social demographics? There are, of course, pragmatic reasons to be concerned with educational equity as well. These include links between education and better health outcomes and among education, workforce development, and national innovation and productivity.

### **The intersection of SEL and equity**

Both address how to provide high-quality instruction for all students, regardless of background. What experiences are appropriate? Through the CASEL Equity Work Group, we’re looking at what I call “equity elaborations”— for instance, examining the five core competencies and highlighting where and how issues of and implications for equity could be made more evident.

Self-awareness applies to all students regardless of racial, ethnic, class, regional, or gender differences. It includes finding and affirming one’s identity, helping students answer the question “Who am I?” Equity elaboration would help make the

### **The Equity Work Group**

As part of his work with CASEL’s Equity Work Group, Rob Jagers is helping to explore how equity can be infused into all the work in practice, research, and policy—for example, updating the descriptions of the five SEL competencies, the SEL District Resource Center, the Schoolwide guide to SEL, and the Collaborating States Initiative. The overarching charge: How do we foster social, emotional, and academic development for all students?

conversations more nuanced, so that teachers would base their instruction on who's standing in front of them. For example, it may be meaningful for rural students and their families to have a social studies unit that explores alternative industries that can replace disappearing farm or manufacturing jobs. Urban students and families might benefit from and be more interested in instruction that examines how to develop urban farming projects.

On social awareness, it's being more aware of cultural demands in particular settings. Superficially, it could be teaching multicultural education through fun, festivals, and food. But on a deeper structural level, it's understanding that American culture tends to put a premium on independence and acquiring things. "The more I have—whether it's grades, knowledge, or money—the more worthy I am." It's a zero-sum game.

But Native American, African-American, and Latino cultures tend to place value on being more communal, where social interdependence is more important. Teachers can build that understanding into their teaching. Cooperative learning and restorative justice approaches are possible ways to leverage this cultural orientation into an asset.

### **On key challenges**

There seem to be more sophisticated conversations happening and more agreement about what we're talking about. CASEL's Collaborating Districts and Collaborating States Initiatives, the Assessment Work Group, the National Commission—all are wrestling with this and see that the issues are historical, deep-rooted, and multi-layered.

But the key issue now is how to operationalize this awareness. For some, especially some white people, "culture and race" refer to "other people" but not them. This is the way that the society has been developed. Although educators have been struggling with issues of race, class, and gender forever, we haven't fully recognized culturally constructed, yet often unconscious, biases that show up in the classroom. People are moving beyond simplistic discussions of "white privilege" and trying to deal with the wide range of adult and youth identities in their classrooms and schools.

### **On project-based learning and youth voice**

This method provides especially fertile ground for further developing SEL competencies with an equity frame. Projects are guided by youths, based on their own lived experiences, with the teacher as a facilitator and co-learner. As a result, students are more engaged and collaborative. And issues of identity, justice, and fairness inevitably come up. Also, service-learning, youth participatory action research, and other approaches that position students as the producers of actionable knowledge are worth looking at.

### **Why these issues are getting so much attention now**

In my world, they have always gotten attention. But more broadly, people across the globe increasingly are challenging inequities—related to income, health, gender, and so on. We do this periodically as a society. The 1960s was probably the last time there was such overt attention to these issues. CASEL’s origins are based in this work, ensuring that children at risk get a high-quality education, too. But we’re really talking about the well-being of the planet and the people on it. In the past, we’ve had tipping points where the inequities become intolerable and unsustainable—when “have-nots” have had it with the “haves.” Sometimes these conflicts were resolved with social unrest, sometimes relatively peacefully.

### **What principals can do now**

Adopt a framework to guide your work and offer an integrated plan and rationale to your staff. Make sure to disaggregate data so you can see the performance of individual students. Reallocate resources, time, and funds effectively. Become more youth-centered, listen to the students, be open to giving them more choice. Don't be overly consumed by test scores. Our challenges are too large to cut out or underserve a substantial number of our emerging problem-solvers because we're overly dependent on a single narrow metric of performance and growth. This work is hard to do, but please don't take it lightly or feel discouraged. Think about what will happen if you don't do it. As Einstein said, “The definition of insanity is continuing to do the same things and expecting different results.”

### **RESOURCES**

Aaronson, B & Laughter, J. (2016). The theory and practice of culturally relevant education: A synthesis of research across content areas. *Review of Educational Research*, March 2016, 86(1), pp. 163–206.

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