Equality and Equity of Access: What's the Difference?

Equality

The ideal of equal access is fundamental to American democracy. The 18th-century notion that all (men) are created equal, before God and before the law, set up the powerful expectation that every citizen deserves the same opportunity to influence the course of democracy, and to benefit from the fruits of a good society. Consequently, the notion succeeds or flounders depending on the experiences of citizens in gaining equal access to the means of participating in the discourses that guide governance. But when a society is stratified into poles of advantage and disadvantage, with the inevitable consequences of privilege and exclusion, the promise of equal access to the discourses necessary for democratic participation rings hollow. Fair access, then, may take on a different meaning in each citizen, but its essence remains the interpretation of "fairness" as equal access and opportunity. Correspondingly, access to channels of communication and sources of information that is made available on even terms to all-a level playing field--is derived from the concept of fairness as uniform distribution, where everyone is entitled to the same level of access and can avail themselves if they so choose.

Equity

When some are excluded or lack the knowledge, income, equipment, or training necessary to participate fully in public discourse, they must overcome obstacles to access in order to ensure fairness. In other words, fairness also demands remedies to redress historic injustices that have prevented or diminished access in the first place: for, just as there can be no fairness without equality, there can be none without justice. That is, in order to maximize opportunities for access experienced by certain groups, a good society commits resources in order to level the playing field. When libraries offer literacy programs, when schools offer courses in English as a second language, and when foundations target scholarships to students from poor families, they operationalize a belief in equity of access as fairness and as justice. Similarly, rural telecommunications cross-subsidies, and the E-Rate, establish their political legitimacy by appealing to equity of access as fairness and as justice.

Equality vs. Equity

Policies that stress fairness as uniform distribution tend to succeed with Americans because they appear to entitle everyone; and, thus, reinforce Americans' dominant construction of fairness as equality. Conversely, policies aiming to achieve equity face recurring challenges as "unfair." Affirmative Action, Lyndon Johnson's attempt to overcome generations of discrimination and injustice against women and minorities, became the law of the land without achieving the approval of Americans who saw it as "unfair" because it appeared to favor some over others; and, thus, to negate the more commonly understood concept of fairness as equality and as uniform distribution.

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Is There a Difference? You Bet!
EQUITY VS. EQUALITY
by Barbara Lewis

In June 1995, the NLTA Executive Council endorsed a publication on Employment Equity re Staff Hiring entitled "Staffing the NLTA Office.

An Employment Equity Strategy Towards Work Place Excellence". This was not only a landmark for the NLTA, but also a first for any agency involved with K-12 education in this province. It also marked the NLTA's understanding and appreciation of the "equality vs. equity" debate, a debate which has plagued the public and private employment sectors for decades. Let's talk about "equality vs. equity".

For most of us, let's admit it, we always assumed that equal treatment of individuals would, in turn, bring about equal results. However, research and common sense tells us otherwise. For example, a child born into a privileged financially and emotionally stable family, with positive role models as family members, surrounded by love and support, will have "stacked" advantages vis a vis a child born into a family with a history of poverty, illiteracy and dysfunctional family relationships. Of course there are exceptions. These are miracles. But they are not the norm. To apply equal expectation and treatment of the children in both these categories, both in school and society, will most certainly not bring "equality of results". Research and realities confirm otherwise.

So what does this have to do with the NLTA's policy on Employment Equity Hiring? A lot. It has been well documented that the success of women and minorities in leadership positions in the educational system of Newfoundland and Labrador has been, to date, dismal. The old arguments: i) they are not qualified; ii) they didn't apply; are challenged by equity hiring initiatives. We have to consider who was writing the rules. Who was setting the expectations. Who was deciding on "suitability" and "qualifications", etc. Not the members of the excluded groups. Current human rights legislation is written to address these past prevalent practices. "Inclusion" of under represented groups and minorities is the thrust of "equity" thinking, policy making and legislation. Treating everyone the same does not create equality, because the starting bases are unequal.

Let's look at an example from the classroom. If a teacher has two students, one with excellent vision and one who is visually challenged, then treating both students equally and not adjusting teaching strategies to accommodate the visually challenged student, will most probably, in the end, not produce achievement results which are equal despite the cognitive ability of the visually challenged student. In this case, equal teaching strategies and treatment could be interpreted as discrimination against the visually challenged student. To realize equality, a different approach in teaching strategies, one

which will compensate and accommodate the disadvantaged person must be applied. That is the essence of "equity treatment" as opposed to "equal treatment".

Now back to the NLTA and its Hiring Policy for staff. The Policy, originally ratified at AGM 1991, was researched and studied by the NLTA Standing Committee on Equity Issues in Education. Despite there being a preponderance of females among the fee paying members, the office staff alignment did not reflect that percentage. Senior staff was top heavy with males and support staff with females. The balance was wrong and needed to be corrected. To assume that "equal access and opportunity thinking," as was the case in the past, was sufficient to correct this imbalance was denied. It had not worked, it could not work, either at the NLTA or elsewhere.

A pro-active employment equity hiring policy is the only answer and that was the position adopted by the NLTA. The emphasis now is on attaining a much more diversified and balanced staff to serve the needs of all NLTA members.

"Equity" policy making and strategies are about a process to eventually attain "equality". "Equity" is the means; "equality" is the targeted result. Between the equity commencement process and the eventual equality results, one must understand and accept that time, commitment, patience and common perspectives and goals are essential. The equity process is a change process. And with all change, conflict and different perceptions from the affected groups can be expected to emerge. The steadfastness with which all groups embrace and endorse the principles of change will determine the outcome. That outcome is "equality" for all, through "equity" strategies.

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http://www.nlta.nf.ca/HTML_Files/html_pages/publications/bulletins/December/equity.html

NLTA National league of Teacher's Associations