Classroom Reflection: Equality or Equity?
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“OK everyone, we are going to start off the lesson by getting into a circle in the middle of the room. Can you please push your desks to the side and bring a chair with you.” The sound in the room changes from the noise of chatter to the low Chewbacca-like groan of desks and chairs being dragged across the linoleum floor. Some students are muttering under their breath at the inconvenience of having to move desks and sit in a circle. Bob darts into the room late from lunch, throws his bag in the corner and grabs a chair to join the circle - “Sorry, Sir.”

“All right class - today I am going to ask you to do something a little bit random,” I say with a mischievous smile on my face. The look of puzzlement crosses some faces. Others look more petulant, already assuming they won’t like this activity. “Everyone take off your left shoe and place it in the middle of the room.” Suddenly the room erupts into a cacophony of moans and groans similar to the sounds I hear from my own children when I ask them to tidy up a mess at home. I have a sudden anxious knot in the bottom of my stomach, as I think to myself this could all fall apart if these students decide not to take off a shoe. Is the risk of this approach really worth the reward?

“Come on, Sandra, your toes aren’t that bad,” mocks John from across the circle. Most students have taken off their shoe and placed it in the circle except for Sandra and Penny. Yikes! I think to myself - I can’t force them to do this.

I ask one more time: “Sandra, Penny - can you please help me out for this one activity and take your left shoe off and put it in the middle.”

“I hate doing this!” says Penny, defiantly determined not to give up her shoe. Slightly annoyed at the situation I decide to press on, realising the attempt to win this battle will not be worth the casualties and I want to win the war.

The smell of feet is starting to invade my nostrils on this warm February afternoon so I figure it’s time to move and get on with the activity. “Ok,” I say to the class of year 13 health students. “Today I am going to demonstrate equality and equity and try to demonstrate the difference using your shoes. Who can remember what equality means from last lesson?” I question, hoping like heck someone in the class was listening and took it on board last lesson. Silence, blank stares, avoiding eye contact… this feels like an eternity. I feel the pressure to ask another question exponentially building but I hold my tongue. I reflect on the fact that I need to give the students more thinking time, a piece of advice from my last observation.

Finally, after what seems like at least five minutes but is probably more like 10 seconds, Filisi raises his hand. “Is it like when everyone gets the same?” he half says and asks.

“Exactly,” I say excitedly, “so let’s do that”. I reach down to the pile of shoes and start to hand them out, cognisant of trying to give the girls’ sandals to the big staunch boys in an attempt to add a bit of insult to injury.
As I am giving out the shoes Joshua, one of my staunch 1st XV boys, says, “What am I supposed to do with this?”

Cheekily I reply: “Put it on, of course,” to which he responds with a mystified look on his face, “I can’t fit this little thing on my big foot. This is useless to me.”

Now I am back at my seat. I ask the students, “Raise your hand if you are happy with your shoe.” Filisi is the only student who raises his hand in the circle. As it turns out, he is the only student to get his own shoe back. It couldn’t have worked out better, I think to myself. I ask the students why they are not happy - everyone got a shoe; it was equal and fair for all. I can almost see the gears, cog by cog moving in their heads, formulating a rebuttal to my statement.

Kelepi fires back at me, “Yeah but the shoes you gave us don’t fit us. They are no use to us.”

“Yesss,” I say with maybe a touch too much gusto. “So, is equality a good thing?” I ask.

“Obviously not, Sir,” Kelepi says, as if I have asked the world’s least discerning question.

“Well, what is the alternative?” I propose using my best-practised teacher voice. I can’t stand the wait any longer and pipe up: “We discussed two things at the start of this lesson both starting with ‘e’ one was equality and the other was…”

“Equity!” John almost yells pointing his finger and smiling, clearly very pleased with himself.

“Can any one remember what that word means?” I sweep my vision around the circle, seeing a Mexican wave of shaking heads when Penny pipes up and says, “It’s when we all have shoes that are the right fit for us, that we can actually walk in.”