

# 20 Self-Critical Things I Will Do to Be a More Equitable Educator

*“When I was young and free and my imagination had no limits, I dreamed of changing the world. As I grew older and wiser, I discovered the world would not change, so I shortened my sights somewhat and decided to change only my country. But it, too, seemed immovable. As I grew into my twilight years, in one last desperate attempt, I settled for changing only my family, those closest to me, but alas, they would have none of it. And now as I lie on my deathbed, I suddenly realize: If I had only changed my self first, then by example I would have changed my family. From their inspiration and encouragement, I would then have been able to better my country and, who knows, I may have even changed the world.”*

*–Unknown Author*

Mark the space below with one of the following symbols to indicate where you are in your practice:

- + This is a common practice for me
- ✓ This is an area I would like to improve
- ✕ This is still a challenge for me

1. \_\_\_\_\_ I learn to pronounce every student’s full given name correctly. No student should need to shorten or change their names to make it easier to pronounce for me or their classmates. I will practice and learn every name, regardless of how difficult it feels or how time-consuming it becomes. That is the first step in being inclusive.

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2. \_\_\_\_\_ I sacrifice the safety of my comfort zone by building a process for continually assessing, understanding, and challenging my biases and prejudices and how they impact my expectations for, and relationships with, all students, parents, and colleagues.

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3. \_\_\_\_\_ I center student voices, interests, and experiences in and out of my classroom. Even while I talk passionately about being inclusive and student-centered in the classroom, I rarely include or center students in conversations about school reform. I must face this contradiction and rededicate to sharing power with my students.

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4. \_\_\_\_\_ I engage in a self-reflective process to explore the ways in which my identity development impacts the way I see and experience different people.

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5. \_\_\_\_\_ I invite critique from colleagues and accept it openly. I accept feedback very well until someone decides to offer me feedback. Though it's easy to become defensive in the face of critique, I will thank the person for their time and courage (because it's not easy to critique a colleague). The worst possible scenario is for people to stop providing me feedback, positive and negative.

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6. \_\_\_\_\_ I never stop being a student. If I do not grow, learn, and change at the same rate the world around me is changing, then I necessarily lose touch with the lives and contexts of my students. I must continue to educate myself—to learn from the experiences of my students and their parents, to study current events and their relationships to what I am teaching, and to be challenged by a diversity of perspectives.

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7. \_\_\_\_\_ I understand the relationship between INTENT and IMPACT. Often, and particularly when I'm in a situation in which I experience some level of privilege, I have the luxury of referring and responding only to what I intend, no matter what impact I have on somebody. I must take responsibility for and learn from my impact because most individual-level oppression is unintentional. But unintentional oppression hurts just as much as intentional oppression.

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8. \_\_\_\_\_ I reject the myth of color-blindness. As painful as it may be to admit, I know that I react differently when I'm in a room full of people who share many dimensions of my identity than when I'm in a room full of people who are very different from me. I have to be open and honest about that, because those shifts inevitably inform the experiences of people in my classes or workshops. In addition, color-blindness denies people validation of their whole person.

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9. \_\_\_\_\_ I recognize my own social identity group memberships and how they may affect my students' experiences and learning processes. People do not always experience me the way I intend them to, even if I am an active advocate for all my students. A student's initial reaction to me may be based on a lifetime of experiences, so I must try not to take such reactions personally.

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10. \_\_\_\_\_ I build coalitions with teachers who are different from me (in terms of race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender, religion, first language, disability, and other identities). These can be valuable relationships of trust and honest critique. At the same time, I must not rely on other people to identify my weaknesses. In particular, in the areas of my identity around which I experience privilege, I must not rely on people from historically underprivileged groups to teach me how to improve myself (which is, in and of itself, a practice of privilege).

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11. \_\_\_\_\_ I work to improve my skills as a facilitator, so when issues of diversity and equity do arise in the classroom, I can take advantage of the resulting educational opportunities. Too often, I allow these moments to slip away, either because I am uncomfortable with the topic or because I feel unprepared to effectively facilitate my students through it. (I often try to make myself feel better by suggesting that the students “aren’t ready” to talk about racism, or sexism or whatever the topic might be, when it’s more honest to say that I am not ready.) I will hone these skills so that I do not cheat my students out of important conversations and learning opportunities.
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12. \_\_\_\_\_ I invite critique from my students, and when I do, I will dedicate to listening actively and modeling a willingness to be changed by their presence to the same extent they are necessarily changed by mine.
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13. \_\_\_\_\_ I think critically about how my preferred learning styles impact my teaching style. I am usually thoughtful about diversifying my teaching style to address the needs of students with a variety of learning styles. Still, I tend to fall back on my most comfortable teaching style most often. I fight this temptation and work harder to engage all of my students.
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14. \_\_\_\_\_ I affirm and model appreciation for all forms of intelligence and the wide variety of ways students illustrate understanding and mastery of skills and knowledge.
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15. \_\_\_\_ I reflect on my own experiences as a student and how they inform my teaching. Research indicates that my teaching is most closely informed by my own experiences as a student (even more so than my pre-service training). The practice of drawing on these experiences, positive and negative, provides important insights regarding my teaching practice.

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16. \_\_\_\_ I encourage all of my students to think critically and ask critical questions about all information they receive including that which they receive from me.

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17. \_\_\_\_ I challenge myself to take personal responsibility before looking for fault elsewhere. For example, if I have one student who is falling behind or being disruptive, I will consider what I am doing or not doing that may be contributing to their disengagement before problematizing their behavior or effort.

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18. \_\_\_\_ I acknowledge my role as a social activist. My work changes lives, conferring upon me both tremendous power and tremendous responsibility. Even though I may not identify myself as a social activist, I know that the depth of my impact on society is profound, if only by the sheer number of lives I touch. I must acknowledge and draw on that power and responsibility as a frame for guiding my efforts toward equity and social justice in my work.

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19. \_\_\_\_\_ I fight for equity for all underrepresented or disenfranchised students. Equity is not a game of choice—if I am to advocate education equity, I do not have the luxury of choosing who does or does not have access to it. For example, I cannot effectively fight for racial equity while I fail to confront gender inequity. And I can never be a real advocate for gender equity if I choose to duck the responsibility for ensuring equity for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender students. When I find myself justifying my inattention to any group of disenfranchised students due to the worldview or value system into which I was socialized, I know that it is time to reevaluate that worldview or system.

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20. \_\_\_\_\_ I celebrate myself as an educator and total person. I can, and should, also celebrate every moment I spend in self-critique, however difficult and painful, because it will make me a better educator. And that is something to celebrate!

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