

Equity Is Not a Buzzword. I Lived It in Room 204.

The first pillar, and what cultural responsiveness actually means · Published June 17, 2026

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Equity has become one of those words that gets printed on school banners and emptied of meaning. So let me tell you what it looked like from inside an actual classroom, because I taught math in Title I public schools across sixth grade, eighth grade, and high school, and equity was never abstract to me. It had names and faces and lunch periods.

Here is the reality I want parents to understand. Many students walk into math class every day and quietly translate themselves before they can even start learning. The way they talk at home is not the way the textbook talks. The examples in the word problems describe lives they have never lived. Nobody in the curriculum looks like them, shops like their family, or celebrates what they celebrate. None of that is the student's deficit. But schools often treat it like one.

I never had a student who could not learn mathematics. I had plenty of students who were never given a reason to believe mathematics belonged to them.

Being a culturally responsive educator means refusing to treat a student's identity as background noise. It means knowing that the student who code switches all day is doing invisible cognitive labor before a single equation appears. It means building examples around lives my students actually lived, and understanding that a quiet kid is not always a disengaged kid. Sometimes a quiet kid is a careful kid in a room that never felt safe enough for mistakes.

It also means holding the bar exactly where it belongs. This is the part people get wrong about equity. Lowering expectations for students from underserved communities is not kindness. It is the most polite form of disrespect that exists in education. I watched well meaning adults hand struggling students easier work to protect their feelings, and I watched those students read that gesture perfectly. They

knew exactly what it meant. He does not think I can.

Let me name something that does not get said enough. The deepest inequity in mathematics is not about zip code or income. It is the lie that math is a gene, that some people simply have it and the rest do not. That lie causes harm in every type of school. We are all robbed of the same truth. Mathematics is practiced and strategic, not inherited. Every student is capable of growing in it, and treating that as fact instead of slogan is the most equitable thing an educator can do.

Here is the part most people miss. The achievement gap is, underneath, a confidence gap. I have taught two students with nearly identical ability and watched one soar and one stall, and the difference was rarely skill. It was whether the student believed they belonged in the room. A child who thinks they are bad at math reads every hard problem as proof, and a child who believes they can grow reads that same problem as a puzzle. Closing the gap that matters means closing that belief gap first. That is exactly where our well-being work and our equity work become the same work, because a student who feels safe, seen, and capable will outlearn a more naturally talented student who feels none of those things, every single time.

At Mathwell, equity means we honor every student's cultural identity, language, and background as an asset in the learning process. We do not ask students to leave themselves at the door. We build the instruction around who they actually are. When a student feels genuinely seen, mathematics stops being a foreign language and starts becoming their own.

That is not a marketing line. That is what I watched happen, every time a student finally got a classroom that treated who they were as a strength instead of an obstacle. The math followed. It always followed.

Written by the founder of Mathwell, a former public school mathematics teacher across sixth grade, eighth grade, and high school, all in Title I schools. Mathwell · Purposeful Secondary Mathematics · Social Emotional Learning · getmathwell.com