



EQUITY: PRACTITIONER'S BRIEF

K20 IDEALS

Introduction

Equity is a fair and just principle that strives to ensure that the needs of all are recognized, respected, and met by having high expectations, adjusting for differentiation, and providing personalization based on individual needs and identities. Though often compared with *equality*, *equity* provides individualized support for all in order to achieve equal levels of success¹.

Achieving equity requires setting universally high expectations; promoting positive school leadership; culturally responsive teaching; accessible learning; differentiated instruction; student-centered learning; reflection on practices; and building partnerships with schools, families, and communities². Moreover, culturally responsive education recognizes diversity as an asset to enhance learning opportunities rather than viewing it as an obstacle to overcome. This concept is one of the fundamental tenets of a thriving, equity-driven learning community that promotes growth and opportunities for all³. This is why a diverse group of stakeholders must be engaged in the dynamic process of continuous improvement. This improvement process must be focused on the situational contexts in which students and families live to ensure equitable educational outcomes and positive student engagement⁴.

Themes of Equity

Framing equity. Institutions recognize that to implement equitable practices, there must be a systematic approach to measurement and implementation. The pursuit of equity requires reflection on cultural, historical, and political inquiry and disruption of the status quo; in practice, agents of equity make use of systems, unpacking the status quo and evoking critical consciousness that allows change at all levels: personal, social, and systemic⁵. Because success hinges on developing a framework that is tailored to community needs, it is critical to instill an equity mindset that fosters identifying and implementing processes. These processes then measure and enable differentiation to promote equitable practices in schools. According to Teemant et al. (2021), “In practice, such work must begin with agents of equity engaging in authentic dialogue resulting in shared values, reciprocal learning, and shared vision, language, and commitment to collective and political action for equity’s sake” (p. 36). This mindset must acknowledge that measuring equity involves assessing tangible and intangible factors. These factors affect efforts focused on championing equitable education for all learners. Critically, it is also important to consider how beliefs and actions shape the nature and scope of engagement among stakeholders—leaders, educators, students and families, and communities.

Impacted stakeholders. The goal of achieving equity in education is not solely the responsibility of the individual classroom teacher or the administration. Educational policies aimed at reform have been unsuccessful because lawmakers have not yet acknowledged that educational issues are closely tied to broader social and economic issues⁶. Gaps in educational opportunities exist because the links between education and the impact that home and community can have on student learning are often ignored when addressing educational policies and reform. Any dialogue about learning and outcomes should include students, their families, and the larger community so that all stakeholders can discuss student achievement and then take action based on their discoveries to overcome achievement gaps. Before families can participate as stakeholders, however, they must be able to imagine an inclusive environment that encourages involvement and engagement. Diverse families should be actively recruited and welcomed as part of the decision-making process and become engaged in evaluating the needs and supports of students⁷.

We expand the discourse and encourage participation from a larger body of stakeholders by understanding the needs of the communities in which schools operate. This includes the elements that play a role in student

achievement: economic and health factors; social, cultural, and political capital; deficit-based thinking; and lax processes for ensuring accountability and responsiveness.⁸ It is vital that discourse among diverse stakeholders is reciprocal because, according to Teemant et al. (2010), “students, families, community representatives, and educators each contribute insights, experiences, expertise, and [. . .] skills in community organizing that make a difference for addressing inequities” (p. 10). This culture of inclusion requires a shared belief among stakeholders and reflects a commitment to offering educational opportunities to all students.⁹ These kinds of opportunities can focus on individualized experiences that respect students’ needs while continuing to meet academic standards and ensure high expectations for all students.¹⁰

Differentiated instruction. In order to have an equity-based mindset in schools, it is imperative to consider various methods of meeting the needs of all students and setting high expectations for both students and staff success. Teachers should expose learners to learning content, learning process, and assessment procedures appropriate to each individual learner’s level of prior knowledge, interest, and learning style¹¹. Educators must also be capable of engaging in lessons that focus on differentiation and inclusive teaching practices.¹² Leithwood (2021) emphasizes the importance of lessons that are “carefully scaffolded, constructivist, often aimed at developing deep understanding, and that help ensure that the curriculum is clearly relevant to all students” (p. 18).

Teacher development. Professional development from internal and external resources should be provided to help educators develop skills for a more equitable learning environment for their students. Goode et al. (2020) found that “having a group of teachers from diverse communities across the nation helped teachers imagine new ways of integrating equity-based lessons and pedagogy in the classroom.”

Professional learning communities. Moreover, professional learning communities, teacher mentors, and a collaborative school environment help ensure all faculty and staff are equipped to meet student needs. A school culture that values trust, openness, and collaborative conversations between teachers—for example, structured data team meetings, peer coaching, and horizontal and vertical curricular planning—allows teachers to share their difficulties and ideas to improve instructional practices.¹³

Data-based decisions. Understanding programmatic success depends on identifying quantitative and qualitative measures of effectiveness. Data-based decision-making is one part of the equation with a focus on characterizing the breadth of indicators of student achievement and success and access to supports and services to provide positive outcomes among diverse student populations.

Administrative support. Administrators at the school and district levels are the primary decision-makers imbued with accountability and responsibility for facilitating success and positive outcomes and engaging with a broad array of community stakeholders. In holding an educational equity mindset, principals are more likely to advocate for quality education for all students, create a climate and culture essential for equity in education, and promote success and achievement for all students.¹⁴

Equity in Practice

With an understanding of the key elements of equity, it is critical to consider the ways in which these elements can be put into practice in the day-to-day classroom environment. Ensuring that students have an equitable experience requires that teachers, administrators, and any adults with whom students interact at school must come together and talk about the foundations on which equity is based.¹⁵ Importantly, they should share the belief that all students can learn, hold high expectations for every student, and implement practices to ensure learning.¹⁶ Such shared beliefs and practices can promote positive relationships among educators and students. These relationships are critical to student success and allow for the development of innate abilities.¹⁷ In addition, positive relationships help motivate students to engage in academic content more meaningfully as they seek to make sense of their world and themselves.

Within this framework, there needs to be a push to promote a school culture that provides space for students to feel a sense of belonging while supporting teachers’ work with students. Another critical component of

providing equitable opportunities for all students is ensuring they have access to knowledgeable, caring adults in their schools.¹⁸ School culture significantly impacts student life and learning more than anything else a student encounters regularly.¹⁹ Thus, part of this culture must include consistently challenging biases that may exist throughout the entire school at all levels and supporting the growth of the adults in the building to support and maintain the desired school culture. Research indicates that teachers who feel confident and supported will implement equity initiatives with greater fidelity, which in turn improves student outcomes.²⁰

More is needed, however, to focus on lessons that meet the socio-psychological realities of students and families situated within the broader context of schools, districts, and the community. In addition, a focus on equity necessitates thoroughly involving and engaging teachers and administrators in the decision-making while ensuring they have the skills, abilities, resources, and proper mindset to situate effectively and prepare them to work toward achieving equity.

Conclusion

Many have defined equity similarly to equality, associated both with characteristics involving equal opportunities for all students.²¹ However, equity calls for individualized support for all to achieve equal levels of success.²² Research around equity focuses on the systematic structures of education²³: an equitable mindset,²⁴ criteria of equity,²⁵ and fundamental aspects of equity.²⁶ A systematic structure gives way to potential holistic change in the educational system within each individualized aspect.²⁷ This change, however, requires an equitable mindset that focuses on a person's beliefs.²⁸ Within this mindset, one can use equity as a criteria to evaluate educational opportunities through a lens of justice.²⁹

References

- ¹ Leithwood, 2021
- ² Ainscow, 2020; Fletcher et al., 2019; Leithwood, 2021; Marcos et al., 2021; Nadelson et al., 2019; Onyishi & Sefotho, 2021
- ³ Castillo, 2023
- ⁴ Shields & Hesbol, 2019; Nadelson et al., 2019
- ⁵ Teemant et al., 2021
- ⁶ Tyack & Cuban, 1995
- ⁷ Castillo, 2023
- ⁸ Fletcher et al., 2019
- ⁹ Ainscow, 2020
- ¹⁰ Cramer et al., 2018
- ¹¹ Onyishi & Sefotho, 2021
- ¹² Duncan & Punch, 2021
- ¹³ Torres et al., 2020
- ¹⁴ Nadelson et al., 2019
- ¹⁵ Leithwood, 2021; Ling & Nasri, 2019; Marcos et al., 2021
- ¹⁶ Marcos et al., 2021
- ¹⁷ Ling & Nasri, 2019
- ¹⁸ Cramer et al., 2018
- ¹⁹ Ling & Nasri, 2019
- ²⁰ Duncan & Punch, 2021; Jacobs et al., 2022
- ²¹ Luke et al., 2013; Majzub, 2013
- ²² Leithwood, 2021
- ²³ Teemant et al., 2021
- ²⁴ Nadelson et al., 2019
- ²⁵ Ling & Nasri, 2019
- ²⁶ Osta & Perrow, 2008
- ²⁷ Teemant et al., 2021
- ²⁸ Nadelson et al., 2019
- ²⁹ Ling & Nasri, 2019

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