

# **Educational Equity and Quality in K- 12 Schools: Meeting the Needs of All Students**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper discusses the importance of equity and quality education in K-12 schools and how employing equity and quality strategies in classroom instructional practices and school culture can positively change children's lives. Educational achievement is a matter of the home, school, and community working in concert to build confidence in a child's life. Without this personal confidence, the child will not perform to her ability and slump down into a state of despair and hopelessness. Heckman (2008) makes a case for investing in children at risk. In a paper titled *The Case for Investing in Disadvantaged Young Children*, he cites 15 points that reduce inequity and raise productivity in schools. This paper examines some of these points and offers additional evidence to broaden the points of reference. A secondary purpose of this paper is to examine select research findings of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) report titled *Equality and Quality in Education: Supporting Disadvantaged Students and Schools*.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

According to the U. S. Census Bureau's (2012, p. 1) most recent school District report, the U.S. has more than 14,000 public school districts and spends more than \$500 billion on public elementary and secondary education each year (combined spending of federal, state, and local governments). Although the United States is listed by the U.S. World Review magazine as the second-best country for education, the U.S. lags behind other countries in math and science.

In the recent Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), which measures reading ability, math and science literacy and other key skills among 15-year-olds in dozens of developed and developing countries every three years, the U. S. placed 38<sup>th</sup> out of 71 countries in math and 24<sup>th</sup> in science (Desilver, 2017). Equality and quality work for all students and help all communities to reduce the social effects of poor educational attainment. One of the hardest-hitting impacts of poor education on communities is the failure of having a well-educated workforce. As such, communities should place more emphasis and higher value on the academic achievement of all students. Without having a well-educated workforce, communities cannot attract new businesses, especially high-tech businesses moving in and establishing jobs. As pointed out by Reference.com (2018), and implicit throughout the educational community, there is a definite correlation between children living in poverty and poor educational attainment.

The impact of poverty on the educational outcome of children is well documented

(Brooks-Gunn Duncan, 2007; Balfanz, Mac Iver, & Byrnes, 2006; Evans, 2004; Rodriguez, & Fabionar, 2010; Ferguson, Bovaird, & Mueller, 2007; Henry, Bryan, & Zalaquett, 2017; Phipps, & Lethbridge, 2007; Stephen et al., 2015). To combat the impact of poverty on schools, school reform and instructional strategies need to be incorporated into the classroom. A few such strategies are collaborative learning, where teachers can design teams to address the most challenging aspects of student learning needs, home learning, and early stimulation for children before entering school (Gordon, 1971). Discovery learning also has merit when teaching children in poverty (Anastasiow, Sibley, Leonhardt, & Borich, 1970). Improving attitudes toward school and teachers in the school increases the performance of at-risk students (Rodriguez, 1990). Rodriguez (1990) maintains that cooperative learning—where students work together in small groups and utilize their strengths to assist other students in the group—has “a consistently positive influence on self-esteem and human relations” (p. 328; see also Slavin, 1980). Using this method, team members rely on their fellow members’ collective performances, and thus, individual accountability is vital to the success of the team.

Students in poverty and students at risk are among an increasing number of students in both rural and urban schools. School leadership is critical to assist this disadvantaged population and to advance equity in education. School leaders should be familiar with the strategies that are successful in motivating students and promote equity and quality teaching and learning methods in the classroom. Equity requires leadership that is dedicated to the success of all students; the mere presence of “leaders” hanging around the school building to pick up a paycheck is not enough. There is an urgent need for school leaders to acquire diversity and equity skills. Equally so, it is important for school districts to employ school leaders who come from the “familiar cultural perspective” (p.19) for the students in the school. Although learning starts at home, the school should be the place where students, regardless of social, economic status, can improve their intellectual skills and become a better student and responsible citizen. Creating equity creates quality schools and high-achieving students.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **What Is Equity?**

When you hear the term equity, does it sound like a euphemism for terms such as access, diversity, civility, equality, integration, or fairness? As a male educator (Dr. Sherwood Thompson), I became familiar with the term in the early 1990s under the tutelage of a senior faculty member in the school of education in a mid-western division one research university. I taught a section of this professor’s Equity in Education course each semester for three years. During that time, and hours of one-on-one discussions with him, I was able to hone my skills and familiarity with the scholarship on this subject, especially his many journal articles and books. Over the years I have refined my understanding of this concept and expanded it to include diversity and quality in education.

As a female educator (Dr. Doris Thompson), I gained significant practice working in the Delta of Mississippi, in one of the most poverty-stricken counties in the United States. I employed many of the strategies of equity and quality teaching and learning techniques as a classroom math teacher and as a senior district leader. I believe that equity and accountability provide for positive opportunities and outcomes for students and

schools. I too believe that the OECD definition captures the spirit of equity in education and thus, I employ it in my research, teaching, and training.

To set the record straight, for this discussion, we will be using the definition provided by the OECD, which expands the term equity in education to include equity and quality education. According to the OECD (2012), “equity in education means that personal or social circumstances such as gender, ethnic origin or family background, are not obstacles to achieving educational potential (fairness) and that all individuals reach at least a basic minimum level of skills (inclusion)”. The OECD definition can be described as incorporating diversity and social justice in its definition. We think this is appropriate for the educational challenges facing 21st-century schools.

This definition is different from the social science terminology, which maintains that equity is one’s relations and interactions with others. Instead, it is viewed as illuminating the link between resources; particularly where there is an imbalance of opportunities among people who have and those who have not.

In an OECD Report titled *No More Failures*, equity in education can be seen through two dimensions: fairness and inclusion (Field, Kuczera, & Pont, 2007). According to the authors, “inclusion means ensuring that all students reach at least a basic minimum level of skills. Equitable education systems are fair and inclusive and support their students in reaching their learning potential, without either formally or informally pre-setting barriers or lowering expectations. Equity as fairness implies that personal or socio-economic circumstances, such as gender, ethnic origin or family background are not obstacles to educational success. We will use this definition as our framework for discussion of equity and quality education in U.S. schools” (p. 15).

### **Background of the Issues of Equity and School Reform**

Equity and access are essential components of quality education for children, but they nonetheless have persisted as barriers in the United States for decades. There is also a notable and distinct difference between equity and equality in education. According to the Center for Public Education (2016), equality in education is achieved when students are all treated the same and have access to similar resources. In contrast, equity is achieved when all students receive the resources they need so they graduate prepared for success after high school.

Darling-Hammond, Wilhoit, and Pittenger (2014) define equity as policies and practices that provide every student access to an education focused on meaningful learning—one that teaches the deeper learning skills contemporary society requires in ways that empower students to learn independently throughout their lives. This goal is one that most schools and educational systems have for their students; however, conditions exist that prevent some students and groups of students from accessing the resources to achieve this goal. In an equitable school or education system, these skills are taught by competent and caring educators who can attend to each child’s particular talents and needs and also have adequate resources available to provide the materials and conditions for effective teaching and learning. An equitable system also does not treat all students in a standardized way, but differentiates instruction, services, and resources to respond effectively to students’ diverse needs so that each student can develop his or her full academic and societal potential.

Equity concerns continue to endure throughout schools and school districts in the

United States. In the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* case that went before the Supreme Court in 1964, the Court declared that education is a right and it must be made available to all on equal terms. This decision marked a huge victory for the civil rights movement, determined that separate was in fact not equal, and forced federal, state and local governments to open public schools to all children in the community. A critical role for the federal government is to promote equity for underserved children and youth, and the nation's most prominent education laws have long had the equal educational opportunity as a central mission (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Unfortunately, this has led many to argue for a view of equity that sets the goal as "adequacy," that is, the principle that all students should receive "an adequate education" regardless of what it takes to provide it (Brighthouse & Swift, 2008).

Demographic diversity also plays a role in educational equity as the United States is a much more diverse nation than it was during the time of the Brown decision. According to the Pew Research Center (2015), this demographic shift is evident: "overall, 266 of these 2,440 counties are less than half white . . . in 19 of the 25 biggest U.S. counties by population, whites make up less than half of the population. Of these, six that were majority white in 2000 are no longer so." Today the White population is about 63 percent of the total and is expected to be less than half by the year 2050. The demographic shift is most evident in our public schools where children of color are already the majority in the western and southern regions of the U.S. (Kena et al., 2015).

### **Working to Bring About Equity**

Over the years, U.S. administrations have fought to improve outcomes for underserved students through major education initiatives; supporting states in their efforts to ensure quality teaching in every classroom, raising standards for all students, building systems to improve instruction, and significantly improving low-performing schools. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) has been an important federal policy for P-12 schools, as it has provided funding to support the education of many of its students who are low income and disproportionately African American and Latino. However, ESEA has changed its emphasis over time from providing funding for targeted academic support of low performing, poor students to the practice that allows the use of allocated Title I funds to promote school-wide change (St. John & Miron, 2003).

In 2001, the U.S. Congress passed the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), designed to improve schools through a system of standards-based accountability. NCLB's accountability provisions demand each state develop content and achievement standards, measure student progress through tests, and intervene in schools and districts that do not meet the targets. As a result of NCLB's implementation, many states ended their open-ended assessments of research, writing, mathematical problem-solving, and scientific inquiry in favor of low-level multiple-choice tests that narrowed the curriculum, especially in schools serving low-income children of color and new English learners (Center on Education Policy, 2006). Furthermore, McMurrer (2007) states that these schools often cut back subjects like science, history, writing, and the arts to focus on test prep in reading and mathematics.

Diamond (2012) challenges the notion that claims creating tighter links among academic standards, curricular content and pedagogy, and standardized testing contribute to improved student outcomes and reductions in educational inequality. He argues that

when accountability policies affect instruction more directly in ways that are inconsistent with the intent of these policies, it may work against educational equity. Educational inequality changes must happen in both instructional content and pedagogy. Students in low-income schools receive less access to valued forms of knowledge than do middle- and upper-income students (Camburn & Han, 2011; Smith, Lee, & Newman, 2001). Research supports that pedagogy in low-income schools is more didactic and emphasizes lecture, recitation, and seat work (Gamoran, Secada, & Marrett, 2000), whereas in middle- and upper-income schools, students often receive instruction "that emphasizes critical thinking, problem-solving, and active participation in learning" (Diamond, 2007, p. 287; Smith et al., 2001). Diamond's study (2012) on instructional practices in Chicago has demonstrated that students received instruction that was predominantly teacher-centered and didactic.

The education sector is characterized by school-level variations in educational resources, and scholars using an institutional stratification perspective argue that educational inequality results from the differential educational resources found in schools serving different populations of students (Roscigno, 2000). Schools serving Black students have often been disproportionately targeted by high stakes accountability sanctions (Diamond & Spillane, 2004) and may respond in ways that exacerbate rather than challenge educational inequality. For example, Diamond and Spillane (2004) show that officials in Chicago probation schools, which are predominantly African American and low-income, reallocate instructional resources in ways that limit the learning opportunities of low-performing students.

Schools serving low-income students and students of color have lower human capital among their teaching staffs. Studies show that disproportionately, less qualified teachers instruct students of color (Darling-Hammond, Chung, & Johnson, 2009, p. 614). Another study in Illinois regarding the distribution of quality teachers found that low-income and minority students are taught by the least qualified teachers; the increases in percentage of low income and minority students correlated with decreases in teacher quality (Presley, White, & Gong 2005). Consequently when those less-qualified and didactic-centered teachers turned to their colleagues for advice about how to become more interactive teachers, the information in their networks may have been limited (Diamond, 2012).

### **Teacher Quality**

Access to well-qualified teachers is one of the important elements of an equitable system. Indicators of equal access as part of school report cards could include the proportions of educators who are fully certified for the courses they teach, have more than three years of experience, or have demonstrated higher levels of accomplishment through National Board Certification (Cook-Harvey et al., 2016). ESSA maintains a federal focus on closing the equity gap with regard to students' access to expert, experienced teachers (Kini & Podolsky, 2016). Under this law, state plans must address disproportionate rates of ineffective or inexperienced teachers in schools that serve low-income students and students of color. This allows one to examine causes of inequity and develop plans.

The state will hold a responsibility to outline how they will evaluate access to effective teachers, address inequities, and publicly report progress (Wayne, Tanenbaum, Brown, & Boyle, 2017). Productive teaching and learning conditions are especially important in solving the inequitable distribution of teachers (Podolsky, Kini, Bishop, &

Darling-Hammond, 2016). Through ESSA, Ronfelt, Loeb, and Wyckoff (2013) believe states can close equity gaps by increasing access to high-quality teacher preparation programs, ensuring that all new teachers have strong support and high-quality mentoring, and improving teaching conditions by supporting principals' ability to create productive teaching environments.

Another strategy for teacher quality is for teachers to develop their own personal vision (Whitaker, Whitaker, & Lumpa, 2000). Teaching is a calling for some; to adhere to the responsibility of the profession, it takes personal vision and individual commitment to working with children. For the teachers who see their work as a calling, the fulfillment of their work and not the financial gain or career advancement is what brings satisfaction (Wrzesniewski, 2012).

### **Culturally Responsive Teaching**

Teaching students using familiar themes, cultural icons, celebrations, and artifacts of one's heritage is one aspect of culturally responsive teaching. Gay (2000), the leading expert on the topic of culturally responsive teaching (CRT), defines this method as "using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of references, and performance style of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them" (p. 29). Gay (2000) lists the following characteristics of CRT:

1. It acknowledges the legitimacy of the cultural heritages of different ethnic groups, both as legacies that affect students' dispositions, attitudes, and approaches to learning and as worthy content to be taught in the formal curriculum.
2. It builds bridges of meaningfulness between home and school experiences as well as between academic abstractions and lived sociocultural realities.
3. It uses a wide variety of instructional strategies that are connected to different learning styles.
4. It teaches students to know and praise their own and each other's' cultural heritages.
5. It incorporates multicultural information, resources, and materials in all the subjects and skills routinely taught in schools.

These characteristics of culturally responsive teaching are just the beginning of developing the intellectual strengths of students. Villegas (1992) maintains that CRT is a process of integrating cultural content that enhances achievement for all [students]. According to Vavrus (2008), "culturally responsive teaching (CRT) is an educational reform that strives to increase the engagement and motivation of students of color who historically have been both unsuccessful academically and socially alienated from their public schools." Aceves and Orosco (2014) maintain that teachers who utilize CRT practices value students' cultural and linguistic resources and view this knowledge as capital to build upon rather than as a barrier to learning. Culturally responsive teaching is a fundamental component of school equity and quality learning. Kozleski (2010) states that in culturally responsive teaching, "it is important that teachers learn about the lives and experiences of other groups in order to understand how different historical experiences

have shaped attitudes and perspectives of various groups” (2010, p. 7).

### **Why Does School Equity Matter?**

Students’ perceptions of their school’s equity can have great impact on a variety of positive outcomes. Improving equity in education and reducing school failure should be a high priority for all school districts and OECD countries. Equity matters in schools.

Gorski (2016) takes a novel approach to school equity. He employs the term equity literacy to describe his work with teachers and exposing them to the knowledge and skills necessary to become, as he describes it, “a threat to the existence of inequity in their spheres of influence” (Gorski, 2016; see also Gorski & Landsman, 2013; Gorski & Swalwell, 2015). With his unique framing of school equity and quality as equity literacy, he promotes knowledge and skills training for teachers around equity rather than culture. In an Intercultural Development Research Association interview, Gorski gives an additional definition of equity literacy by expressing the following:

The equity literacy approach is a comprehensive framework for preparing teachers and students to see the world through an equity lens. Speaking specifically about teachers, the idea is that creating an equitable classroom environment for all of my students requires a set of knowledge and skills that often are not taught in teacher education programs or even in diversity in-service sessions. This means recognizing biases and inequities, including those that are very subtle, and knowing how to respond to and redress biases and inequities in our classrooms and schools (Posner, 2015, p. 1).

The OECD makes it very clear that equity matters. In their report titled, *Equity and Quality in Education: Supporting Disadvantaged Students and Schools*, the OECD (2012, p. 10) reports that “equity in education means that personal or social circumstances such as gender, ethnic origin or family background, are not obstacles to achieving educational potential (fairness) and that all individuals [should] reach at least a basic minimum level of skills (inclusion). This report repeats the theme that improving equity in education and preventing school failure is cost-beneficial. Equity matters because it improves schools and assists students in achieving academic success.

Heick (2018) lists 29 factors that he labels characteristics of a good school. Most of these factors are equity-based and provide quality education for children and school improvement. The 29 factors are:

**Table 1.** Heick Characteristics of a Good School

#	Characteristic
1	A good school can adapt quickly to human needs and technology change.
2	A good school produces students that not only read and write but choose to.
3	A good school sees itself.
4	A good school has diverse and compelling measures of success—measures that families and communities understand and value.
5	A good school is full of students that don’t just understand “much,” but rather know what’s worth understanding.
6	A good school knows it can’t do it all, so seeks to do what’s necessary exceptionally well.

#	Characteristic
7	A good school improves other schools and cultural organizations it's connected with.
8	A good school is always on and never closed. (It is not a factory.)
9	A good school makes certain that every single student and family feels welcome and understood on equal terms.
10	A good school is full of students that not only ask great questions but do so with great frequency and ferocity.
11	A good school changes students; students change great schools.
12	A good school understands the difference between broken thinking and broken implementation.
13	A good school speaks the language of its students.
14	A good school doesn't make empty promises, create noble-but-misleading mission statements, or mislead parents and community-members with edu-jargon. It is authentic and transparent.
15	A good school values its teachers and administrators and parents as agents of student success.
16	A good school favors personalized learning over differentiated learning.
17	A good school teaches thought, not content.
18	A good school makes technology, curriculum, policies, and its other "pieces" invisible. (Ever go to a ballet and see focus on individual movements?)
19	A good school is disruptive of bad cultural practices. These include intolerance based on race, income, faith, and sexual preference, aliteracy, and apathy toward the environment.
20	A good school produces students that know themselves in their own context, one that they know and choose. This includes culture, community, language, and profession.
21	A good school produces students that have personal and specific hope for the future that they can articulate and believe in and share with others.
22	A good school produces students that can empathize, critique, protect, love, inspire, make, design, restore, and understand almost anything—and then do so as a matter of habit.
23	A good school will erode the societal tendency towards greed, consumerism, and hoarding of resources we all need.
24	A good school is more concerned with cultural practices than pedagogical practices—students and families than other schools or the educational status quo.
25	A good school helps student separate trivial knowledge from vocational knowledge from academic knowledge from applied knowledge from knowledge-as-wisdom.
26	A good school will experience disruption in its own patterns and practices and values because its students are creative, empowered, and connected, and cause unpredictable change themselves.

#	Characteristic
27	A good school will produce students that can think critically—about issues of human interest, curiosity, artistry, craft, legacy, husbandry, agriculture, and more—and then take action.
28	A good school will help students see themselves in terms of their historical framing, familial legacy, social context, and global connectivity.
29	A good school will improve the community it is embedded within and serves.

*Note.* Most of these factors support equity based and quality education. Developed by Heick (2018).

## CONCLUSION

Equitable schools are models of deeper learning that incorporate a continuum of educational competencies for both the student and the school. Equal access is only the first step; equal treatment, appreciation of one’s own cultural and the cultures of others, equitable compensation and resources, and shared values that accept the presence of diverse racial, cultural, economic and social groups are just as important.

Equity and quality in schools are based on a foundation that embraces the perspective that all children can learn. This perspective recognizes, respects, appreciates, and celebrates the rich human differences that make up our diverse societies. At the school level, equity plays a vital role in broadening the base and scope of learning and teaching. The balance of learning rests in the practices of inclusion, respect, and self-appreciation.

According to Breveman & Gruskin (2003) equity means social justice. Equity encompasses a process where the principle of fairness is practiced. It has been said that “equity—what is fair and just—may not, in the process of educating students, reflect strict equality—what is applied, allocated, or distributed equally” according to the Glossary of Educational Reform (Equity, 2016). It is likely that the term equity will be conflated with other similar terms, according to Morton and Fasching-Varner (2015). These authors maintain that equity is characterized by fairness and justice. They believe that the term equity implies what is in the best interest of others; however, the term might become entangled with terms such as equality, equal rights, diversity, and fairness.

Schools are more than a place for students to gain a standardize education. Schools must be an incubator that grow students into productive, empathic and responsible adults. The impact that schools have on our communities affect the way our society evolves. Without sound equity practices, schools are failing students and preventing them from at least gaining the basic minimum level of knowledge, skill and proficiency. At the same time, communities are penalized by not having the most talented individuals trained for leadership and professional engagement. Equity and quality education are a bulwark for protecting democracy and refueling society with professional and talented individuals that can assume responsibility for leadership and professional roles in society.

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