Best Practices for Achieving Equity in Education

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Abstract:

Educational equity, a hot topic in education, creates inclusive classrooms that empower all students to succeed. Equity, rather than equality, is based on the idea that all students should have access to the resources that they need in order to achieve success both in and out of the classroom. Equity in education is essential for providing a strong educational foundation and ensuring that all students' individual needs are met. Students come to school from all different backgrounds and experiences, and they all deserve equal opportunities for success no matter their race, gender, or income level. Focusing on educational equity helps to ensure that all students have access to a free basic education that in turn promotes economic growth and positive societal changes.

Equity requires that curriculum be inclusive, authentic, and promote community involvement in order to create a positive, engaging learning environment that supports even the most struggling students. Students can't change who they are or where they came from, but with an equitable education, they can develop the skills and confidence they need for a lifetime of success.

Introduction:

Equality and the concept of treating people equally has become a major societal focus in recent years both in and out of the classroom. As early as preschool, students can often be seen dividing toys or snacks to make certain that everyone has an equal amount. While equality can be a good thing when it comes to LEGO bricks and cookies, schools should actually be striving for equity rather than equality. The difference between equality and equity makes all the difference when creating an inclusive classroom that empowers students to succeed. Equality in education means giving each student the exact same thing, whether it be time, money, or classroom resources. Equity, on the other hand, means that we give each individual student what they need in order to succeed.

Although equality gives each student equal resources and support, equity is most fair because it puts all students on an equal playing field by personalizing learning to their unique needs.

It is imperative that schools focus on equity in order to address the needs of each student, no matter their background, race, financial status, or academic performance. All students come to school with different experiences and ability levels, and it is the school's responsibility to meet students where they are, and provide them with the support and resources that they need to succeed both academically and socio-emotionally. But, before schools can ensure that they foster equity in the classroom, they must first be able to identify which students are disadvantaged and how to allocate appropriate resources in order to guarantee equal opportunity for success.

Once schools and teachers identify individual student needs, then the real work begins. Promoting equity at the school and classroom level requires administrators and teachers to consider classroom design, resources, and practices in order to ensure that students' academic and social-emotional needs are being met. Administrators, staff, and teachers must engage in a variety of strategies that foster the development of equity and provide equitable opportunities. True equity in the field of education requires many systemic changes, but many changes can be done in the classroom to address individual student needs and promote equity. Once schools work toward equity and provide equal opportunity to succeed, even the most disadvantaged students, schools, parents, and the outside community will all experience the many benefits of equity in education.

What is Equity in Education?

Equity has become a hot topic in education, and is perhaps the most important issue of our time because it encompasses who students are, which affects every aspect of education (Heick, 2015). Equity refers to providing each student with what he or she needs in order to be successful. Equity is not always equal because some students need more than others due to individual circumstances. According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), which has made a considerable effort to improve equity in education in recent years, equity is "a fair and inclusive system that makes the advantages of education available to all" ("Ten Steps to Equity in Education," 2008). Equality is often used interchangeably with equity, but in reality, these two terms are very different. Equality means that every student receives the same resources and opportunities, no matter their background, race, or ability level. This may seem like a good educational principle, but unfortunately, not every student comes to school performing at the same level or with the same background.

Equity, or providing individual students with specific resources that allow them to have the same opportunities as their peers, is what all schools and teachers should be striving for. An example of equality would be giving each student a textbook to take home to complete their homework. For the majority of students, this would be enough. But for the students who don't speak English or those who don't have access to paper and pencils at home, the textbook is not enough to help them complete the assignment. These students will need extra resources, and schools who understand the importance of equity will provide these particular students with more than just a textbook.

Although some students will receive more help or resources in an equitable classroom, it is actually the fairest of systems because each student is receiving what he or she uniquely needs to be successful.

The most historically disadvantaged students are those from racial minority groups, low socio-economic status ("SES"), English as a second language learners, and students with disabilities ("Ten Steps to Equity in Education," 2008). Students from these groups often need additional resources in order to perform at the same level as their non-disadvantaged peers due to life circumstances out of their control. For example, students from financially disadvantaged households are often unable to attend preschool due to the cost which means that they often start kindergarten performing below their peers due to lack of exposure. In a classroom based on equity, these students would receive additional resources until they are performing at the same level as their more advantaged peers.

According to the OECD, equity in education is based on two factors - fairness and inclusion ("Ten Steps to Equity in Education," 2008). Fairness, in terms of equity, translates to providing students with what they need to succeed. A school focused on equity strives to ensure that students' gender, socio-economic status, or primary language does not prevent them from performing at their highest possible level both academically and socially. Inclusion refers to guaranteeing that all students, even those from traditionally disadvantaged groups, have access to a minimum standard of education ("Ten Steps to Equity in Education," 2008). Inclusion means that every student should graduate with the same basic skills, ideally resulting in college and career readiness.

Equity in education is essential for ensuring that all students have opportunities to be successful and fostering positive school experiences, especially for students from minority or disadvantaged backgrounds. Administrators and teachers naturally have the same goal for all of their students - to help them perform at his or her highest potential. But the resources needed for each student to reach that goal are not always the same. Schools that focus on equity understand that every student has different needs and are willing to address these individual needs in order to achieve fairness and inclusion.

Why is Equity in Education Important?

Although schools have come a long way since "separate but equal" education, the fact remains that many students in first world, developed countries are dropping out of high school before graduation or are graduating without basic skills. These students are typically from one or more disadvantaged groups and are at risk for a lifetime of struggles. For example, a study that compared SES with math performance showed that students from low socio-economic status backgrounds are much more likely to score lower in math than those from higher SES families ("Ten Steps to Equity in Education, 2008).

Students with opportunity gaps, or those who do not start school with the same social or financial advantages as their peers often perform at a lower level due to lack of equity and available resources.

Although the average person with no major or obvious disadvantages may seem unaffected by equity in education, this is not the case. Everyone is affected by a school's dedication to equity in education because a fair education provides all students with the resources they need to develop the important academic and social skills needed to become productive members of society. Without equity, society as a whole is negatively impacted by a school's inability to provide for its most vulnerable students as these students are often unable to graduate, find work, and provide for their family, creating a perpetual burden on society.
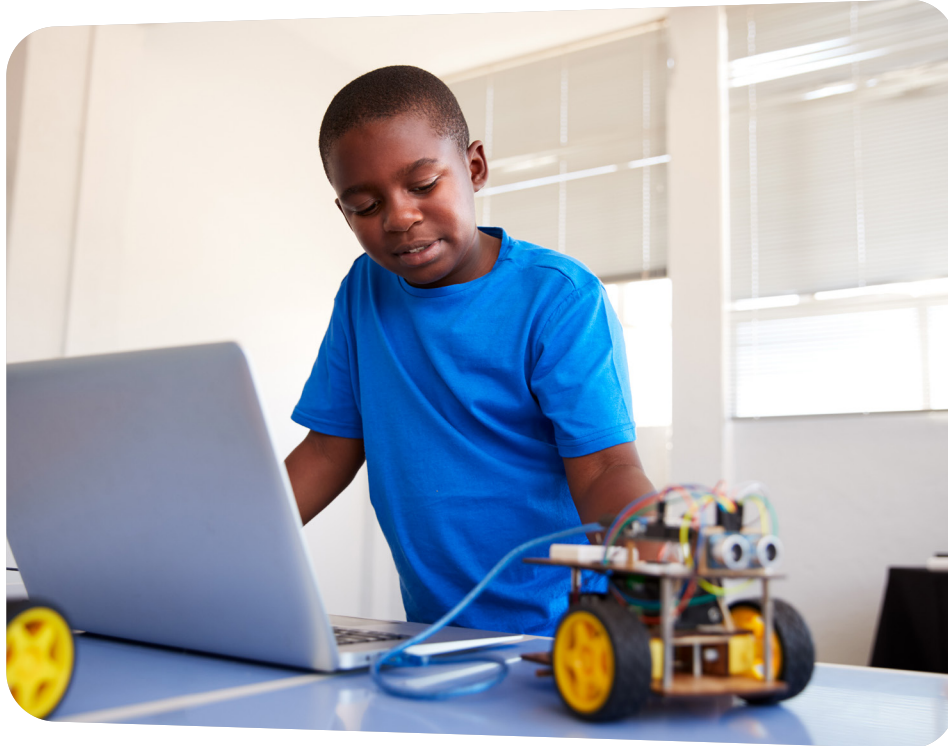
According to Ben Levin in his article Greater Equity in Education, "reducing school failure strengthens individuals' and societies'capacities to respond to recession and contribute to economic growth and social well-being" (p.1) Thus, school equity is a policy that affects and benefits everyone.

Morally, striving for equity is the right and ethical thing to do. Providing students with free and appropriate education is the purpose of public schooling and addressing the individual needs of each student and determining which resources would best serve each student is the only way to implement equitable education (Castelli et al., p. 2243). A student's background, economic status, or gender should not determine his or her future and equity is the only way to ensure that disadvantaged students have equal opportunities for success.

How to Implement Equity in Education

True equity in education requires both big and small changes. Although ensuring equal opportunities for students through equity in education may seem complicated, many equity strategies are quite simple and easy to implement. The OECD determined a set of ten steps to equity in education that can be sorted into the following three categories: design, practices, and resources ("Equity in Education: What it Is and Why it Matters").

Design

The first step under educational design is to limit early tracking and streaming and postpone academic selection ("Equity in Education: What it Is and Why it Matters"). Sorting students based on academic performance or perceived cognitive abilities often results in achievement gaps. Evidence shows that early sorting and tracking of students can be detrimental to students and only serves to promote inequities ("Ten Steps to Equity in Education," 2008). Instead, schools should delay academic tracking and all tracking and streaming should be supported with research-based data. When students are separated by ability level, it is often difficult to prove themselves capable of more, as it becomes a self-fulling prophecy and a perpetual cycle of academic struggle, compounded by circumstances out of their control. Students in early childhood who have not yet been exposed to or taught certain skills may not be able to demonstrate mastery simply because they need additional help or resources, not because they are not capable of developing the skill. Grouping or tracking students, especially in early grades, only serves to widen opportunity gaps and results in inequitable education.

The second recommended step towards equity in education is to manage school choice to prevent inequity ("Equity in Education: What it Is and Why it Matters"). For example, many charter schools admit students based on test scores or grades, which results in already disadvantaged students suffering due to lack of resources and opportunities. ESL students, minorities, and students from lower socio-economic statuses are not as likely to perform well on entrance exams due to individual circumstances, making school choice a less equitable design.

Most districts offer some degree of school choice, including bussing and charter school options, and although school choice can support equity, it often does the opposite as many school choice options are based on academic achievement.

Completely eliminating charters is not the solution because they do have the potential to promote equity; rather, the admittance process should be regulated to include selection methods such as lotteries and other processes that do not rely solely on academic performance or test scores ("Ten Steps to Equity in Education," 2008). For example, admittance based on lottery would promote equity and guarantee that students of all backgrounds are selected for the best schools.

The next step recommended by the OECD to promote equity is to provide appealing alternatives in upper secondary education and move as many obstacles to graduation as possible to decrease the dropout rate ("Equity in Education: What it Is and Why it Matters"). Students from disadvantaged groups are more likely to drop out due to obstacles such as struggling finances, lack of support, and disinterest in school after years of academic tracking.

When at-risk students drop out, they often leave school with less basic skills and less options for employment, creating a burden on society. One of the best ways to ensure educational equity is to provide other attractive options and career opportunities, such as vocational tracks, for students less likely to attend college ("Ten Steps to Equity in Education," 2008). Schools can offer career advice and counseling as well as additional support for students struggling academically in order to motivate them and decrease the likelihood of dropping out. In addition progressive, student-centered curriculum that includes hands-on experiences and has real-world application, often increases engagement and allows students of all backgrounds and ability levels to experience academic success.

The last step under educational design for promoting equity in education is to offer second chance programs ("Equity in Education: What it Is and Why it Matters"). Unfortunately, even in an equity-focused school, some students will still drop out. For those who do drop out due to various circumstances, it is often difficult to gain employment or advance financially; therefore, it is imperative that schools and districts offer second chance opportunities. Second chances for those who do not complete high school the traditional way include GED programs, literacy training, and work-based programs that provide students with alternative schooling options ("Ten Steps to Equity in Education," 2008).

Practices

The next three steps to equity in education fall under the umbrella of educational practices, and the first of these steps is to identify and provide support to those students who fall behind socially and academically while reducing grade-level retention ("Equity in Education: What it Is and Why it Matters"). Early intervention for struggling students is key to keeping students on track academically and requires teachers to perform both informal and formal assessments in order to determine which students need support and in which areas.

The OECD recommends short, yet intense interventions for struggling students who perform below grade level rather than retention, as there is little evidence that retention is actually beneficial to students ("Ten Steps to Equity in Education," 2008). Teachers and schools must work to develop alternative teaching and intervention strategies that provide students with individualized support in order to improve skills and foster equity. In addition to providing individualized support, schools can promote equity through standards-based grading, which focuses on individual student progress rather than a specific letter grade (Joseph, 2021). Standards-based grading eliminates the pressure of making good grades and instead focuses on the development of skills and content knowledge, which allows all students to grow and succeed along their own trajectory.

One of the most important steps to equity in education is strengthening the home-school connection, especially for disadvantaged families ("Equity in Education: What it Is and Why it Matters"). Although classroom intervention is obviously important to support struggling and disadvantaged students, the fact remains that they also need support at home. Many students from at-risk groups also have struggling, disadvantaged parents. In order to promote equity, and strengthen the link between school and home, schools must encourage participation from parents and create a welcoming and accepting environment that promotes family involvement.

In addition, effective project-based learning extends across all discipline areas so that students are immersed in the project throughout the school day. There isn't just a specific time-block set aside for PBL, but rather the entire school day is spent engrossed in the challenge, no matter the subject

Studies show that increased parental involvement results in increased academic performance and supports the development of important social skills ("Ten Steps to Equity in Education," 2008). In addition, many students who are most in need of an equitable education are migrant students with parents who do not speak English. It is especially vital that schools create opportunities for authentic involvement from families of immigrant students who speak different languages (Heick, 2015).

Educational equity includes involving the community and outside resources in an effort to support students, and families, both in and out of the classroom. According to Castelli et al. in their article "Equity in Education: A General Overview," integration between school and commu-

nity resources is essential to creating an equitable education (p. 2245). Students will benefit when school and community resources are combined to more effectively address students' academic and socio-emotional needs.

The next step to equity in the classroom is responding positively to diversity and ensuring that minorities and migrants are included in mainstream education ("Equity in Education: What it Is and Why it Matters"). In order to establish equity in the classroom, minorities and migrants must be provided the resources they need, as they are historically less likely to graduate high school, and more likely to be in special education ("Ten Steps to Equity in Education," 2008). Immigrant students, especially, need support learning English through a variety of teaching methods and programs. Rather than simply place them in special education, schools must provide them and their families with additional resources.

Teachers must implement various student-centered teaching methods that support their ability to learn English while remaining in class with their peers. One way to respond positively to diversity is to review the curriculum and all teaching materials in order to make certain that students of all backgrounds and races are represented (Joseph, 2021). When students see themselves personally reflected in the curriculum, they will naturally feel more connected and engaged in the learning process, leading to more positive school experiences.

Resources

The third equity component involves educational resources. The first step to equity in education related to resources is to provide solid education for all students, regardless of background, race, or ability level, and to focus on early childhood and basic schooling ("Equity in Education: What it Is and Why it Matters"). Early childhood education and care is one of the most effective ways to promote equity because it helps struggling students develop basic academic and social skills at an early age so that they have the opportunity to begin kindergarten performing at the same level as their peers.

According to Waterford.org, in their blog titled "Equity in Early Education: The Principle," struggling parents often cannot afford early childhood education or don't understand its importance, so "removing these barriers and creating more access to early learning options can make all the difference in a child's education" (2018). Of course, basic education at all levels should be an equity-related goal because it provides all students with the opportunity to graduate with the knowledge and skills necessary for success in post-secondary education, and the workforce.

The ninth step to equity in education is to ensure that resources are allocated to students with the greatest needs ("Equity in Education: What it

Is and Why it Matters"). Educational resources are already limited; there-
fore, it is especially important to ensure that the funds that schools do
have are being used for the most at-risk and needy populations. When
resources are allocated effectively and students' individual needs are
met, equity is achieved. The allocation of resources involves more than
just monetary funding, and includes highly qualified teachers as well
("Ten Steps to Equity in Education," 2008). Schools with a high population
of disadvantaged students often have difficulty attracting and keeping
effective, experienced teachers, resulting in an increase in inequity. In
addition to highly-qualified teachers, classroom technology is an im-
portant resource for promoting equity. In recent years, technology has
helped teachers address students' individual needs by providing immedi-
ate feedback, promoting engagement, and personalizing learning to the
needs of each learner (Leahy et al., p. 85).

**Technology, when used effectively, can help schools create equitable
learning environments and help teachers make important instructional
decisions that foster individual student growth and success.**

The tenth and final step to ensuring equity in education is to create and
work toward measurable goals regarding equity, focusing particularly on
graduation rates ("Equity in Education: What it Is and Why it Matters"). As
districts work toward equity in the classroom, it is essential that schools
have a method for measuring the success of specific resources and
strategies. National testing of students' basic skills is one way to deter-
mine the success of a school's equity strategies, as are numerical tar-
gets such as a specific numerical goal for a reduction in dropouts ("Ten
Steps to Equity in Education," 2008)). No matter how schools choose to
measure and evaluate specific equity goals, it is vital that they utilize the
data to shape future policy in an effort to continue to promote equitable
opportunities for all students.

Benefits of Equity in Education

 Although achieving equity in education is a robust goal that requires both major and minor changes at the national, state, and local levels; the benefits of equity are well worth the effort. Perhaps the most important of these benefits is increased academic performance, and an increase in test scores ("Why Understanding Equity...," 2020). When students' needs are met, and they receive the resources necessary to support their individual journey towards success, students' skills and scores naturally improve. For example, an ESL student who receives focused English language support will quickly gain the skills necessary to understand and complete assignments in English, proving that the extra resources were both effective and justified.

In addition, students who attend schools that make equity a priority tend to be healthier physically, and emotionally ("Why Understanding Equity...," 2020). When teachers create a classroom environment in which students feel safe, accepted, and cared for, students are more likely to engage in

positive social behaviors, including conflict resolution and self-regulation. Furthermore, studies show that diverse, equitable populations are associated with better health and longer lifespans ("Why Understanding Equity…," 2020). An equitable education promotes the skills and knowledge necessary to make responsible, healthy decisions, leading to overall better health.
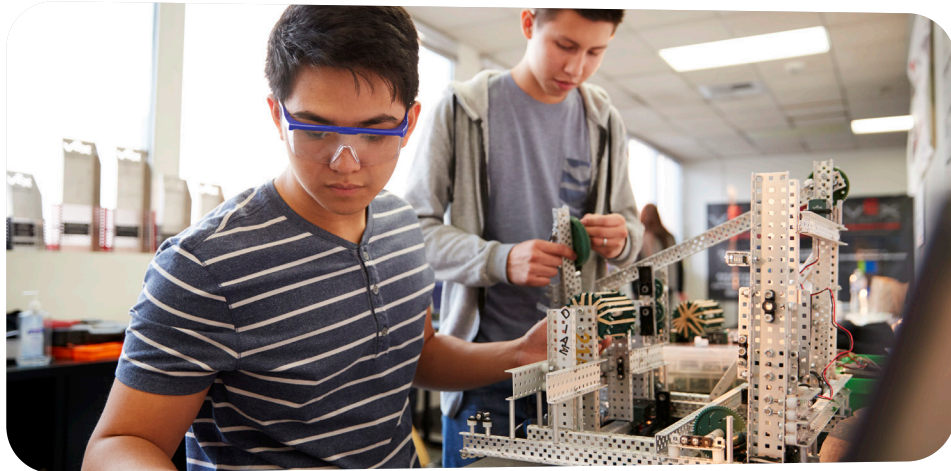
Schools who make equity a priority naturally promote the development of important social skills, including tolerance, empathy, communication, and respect ("Why Understanding Equity…," 2020). When teachers and staff make a focused effort to meet the needs of their students they model positive social skills and help to establish a positive social environment, which contributes to students' social-emotional development. Students who feel safe and accepted are more likely to connect with their peers and engage in positive behaviors
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Yet another benefit of equity in education is economic growth ("Why Understanding Equity…," 2020).When schools make the effort to help students overcome disadvantages and inequalities through effective allocation of resources and intentional teaching strategies, they inadvertently help the economy because in an equitable classroom, students develop the knowledge and skills necessary to become productive, contributing members of society. Test scores and graduation rates increase in equita

environments, leading to increased career opportunities, more qualified workers, and economic growth (Levin, 2012). When students feel accepted and valued by their community, they are more likely to use their knowledge and skills to better the community, which in turn stimulates economic growth.

Conclusion

Equity in education is something schools all over the world should strive for. Equity, rather than equality, is based on the idea that all students should have access to the resources that they need in order to achieve success both in and out of the classroom. Equity in education is essential for providing a strong educational foundation and ensuring that all students' individual needs are met. Students come to school from all different backgrounds and experiences, and they all deserve equal opportunities for success no matter their race, gender, or income level.

Focusing on educational equity helps to ensure that all students have access to a free basic education that in turn promotes economic growth and positive societal changes. Equity won't be achieved overnight, but with enough effort and support, schools can make significant impacts on students' lives as they continue to make important policy changes to promote equitable education.

Equity requires that curriculum be inclusive, authentic, and promote community involvement in order to create a positive, engaging learning environment that supports even the most struggling students. Students can't change who they are or where they came from, but with an equitable education, they can develop the skills and confidence they need for a lifetime of success.

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