



# Understanding equity in education.

## Part 1: What is equity?



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**Dr Pasi Sahlberg investigates the concept of equity as it applies to education. This article is the first in a two-part series on equity in education.**

### What do people want?

Three years ago, I asked my colleagues the following questions: What do Australian adults think about educational equity? Do they think our school education is fair and inclusive for all students? What do they think equity in education means? Do they care about this issue at all?

We did what academics normally do; we conducted a survey that included more than 2,000 adults in NSW to find out their beliefs and attitudes about educational equity. The results were surprising (Gonski Institute for Education, 2020). By using a scale from 1 to 10, the importance of achieving educational equity in Australia was rated 9, on average. These same people rated the NSW school systems a 6.3 on a 10-point scale evaluating their performance on educational equity. Nine of every ten respondents

thought equity should be either a single or dual priority in Australian education.

My takeaway was that NSW parents and other adults do want more equitable education. Many of them see it as a moral imperative, some even as a human rights issue. The survey also showed that people have a wide range of beliefs regarding what equity is all about.

Equity in education has become a key national goal for schooling during the past decade or so (Sahlberg and Cobbold, 2021). The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) that coordinates the well-known PISA survey advises governments to give equity similar high priority in education policies as they give to excellence (OECD, 2012). Equity is also one of the main goals in the [Alice Springs \(Mparntwe\) Education Declaration](#) (Council of Australian Governments Education Council, 2019). In short, it is becoming clear that a world-class education system is hard to achieve without smarter investments in equity of education.

Around the world, equity is frequently mentioned in national education policies, but it has never been clearly defined, either elsewhere or here in Australia. This has resulted in different interpretations, inadequate targets, inappropriate monitoring, and the sad fact that at the end of the day no one is held responsible for increasing inequities in our education systems. If we want to move away from repeating the fashionable policy rhetoric aiming at 'excellence and equity' and start to build more equitable and sustainable education for all our children, we need a commonly agreed definition for 'equity in education'.

## Equality of opportunity is not equity

In education policy documents and literature, 'equity' is sometimes used as a synonym for 'equality'. The principle of 'equality of opportunity' has been the

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key idea in the Nordic education systems where increasing access to secondary and tertiary education have been policy priorities since the early 1990s. In the past, it has meant providing all students with the 'equal opportunity' to pursue their talents and aspirations. As we have stated elsewhere (Sahlberg and Cobbold, 2021), equality of educational opportunity has a strong, meritocratic element in that the quality of education provided should not be dependent on a student's domicile, gender, or social or ethnic background.

The problem with the concept of 'equality of opportunity' is that it is difficult to compare different individuals' education opportunities in the same way we can compare their age, height or weight. Consequently, a wide range of different interpretations of the concept exist. These include equal access to education, equal access to high quality curriculum, equal resources for all students, and equal educational outcomes.

So, what is wrong with ensuring that every child is given equal opportunity in education? Nothing, but the difficulty arises because the degree of equality or inequality cannot be quantified (or measured). We are unable to determine how much equality or inequality of opportunity is just and acceptable. In other words, it leads to setting limited or even wrong-headed educational targets for enhancing equity.

What is most problematic with this view of equity is that it tolerates wide inequalities in learning outcomes between students from different socio-economic backgrounds. It is common knowledge that affluent and well-educated parents can foster their children's abilities and talents more than disadvantaged or poor parents, even if all children would have 'equal' access to education. Lipsey (2014, p 37) writes,

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'Equality of opportunity, when combined with gross inequality of outcome, is the worst possible recipe for a harmonious society'. Unfortunately, this has been evident in many education systems during the past two decades. Therefore, we need a better definition of 'equity in education'.

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## Defining equity

The Review of Funding for Schooling, or the Gonski Review, ten years ago defined equity in schooling as 'ensuring that differences in educational outcomes are not the result of differences in wealth, income, power or possessions' (Gonski et al., 2011, p 105). According to this definition, 'all students must have access to an acceptable international standard of education, regardless of where they live or the school they attend' (Gonski et al., 2011, p 105). The OECD (2012), defines equity in education through two dimensions: fairness and inclusion, which is similar to the definition adopted by the Gonski Review.

Many of these earlier efforts to define equity in education fall short of adequately combining equality of access and equality of outcomes in education. The new meaning of equity in education should state that 'all students receive an adequate education, and educational outcomes for different social groups should be similar'. Let me explain what this new definition means.

In reference to equity in education, this definition of equity has two facets – individual and social. From an individual perspective, equity means that all students receive an education that enables them to realise their talents and fully participate in society in a way of their choosing. We call this an 'adequate' education (Sahlberg and Cobbold, 2021). This individual dimension of equity means that everyone has the right to learn the knowledge, skills and competencies

to understand the world, choose their own path in society, and actively take part in shaping society. This formulation makes education a basic human right.

From a social perspective, equity means that students from different social groups should achieve similar average outcomes and a similar range of variation in these outcomes. People often think that equitable education means that all students should achieve the same education outcomes in school. This is, of course, a naïve and utopian expectation. However, it is reasonable to assume that the different talents and abilities that drive good learning outcomes are distributed similarly across different social and ethnic groups in society. Thus, it is fair to expect that urban and rural students' outcomes have similar averages and distributions across the achievement scale. Similarly, educational outcomes of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students, affluent and disadvantaged students, and girls and boys should behave the same way.

Closing the achievement gap, a common policy slogan addressing equity in education, is not enough to accomplish equity. The goal needs to be to close the achievement gaps between different equity groups.

## The dual goal of equity

The previously mentioned dual goal of equity in education is easy to justify. First, it does not require any compromising or lowering of educational expectations to achieve the same educational outcomes for all students. Instead, it promises a proficient level of education for all, and a fair share of the benefits brought by education for different social groups. Second, the dual goal of equity provides an operational policy framework for system leaders and school principals by

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offering a measurable approach to monitoring and assessing progress towards more equitable education. In other words, it sets concrete targets to be followed up and achieved. Questions such as: What proportion of students complete Year 12? What are the learning gaps between affluent and disadvantaged students? Or between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students? should be asked.

A new definition of equity in education is essential to making real progress towards world-class schooling in NSW. International evidence suggests that we can reduce the negative correlation between social disadvantage and student achievement if we want to do so (Sahlberg, 2021). It would be wrong to think that schools can fix inequities in education alone. Lessons from successful countries show that fairer and more equitable education only becomes a reality when different public policy sectors and stakeholders join forces to combat social and educational inequalities.

Achieving equity and excellence in education for all Australian children, as is promised in the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration, is a challenging goal. The fact that we live in a country that has large income and wealth inequalities, where gender equality still remains a dream, and where inequality experienced by First Australians continue to grow, does not make building equitable education systems any easier. But as one of the wealthiest nations, we can afford to keep the promise of equity and excellence for all.

It is important to understand that no society can be called a democracy while some social groups continue to be discriminated against in the provision of education or, indeed, in the provision of other public services such as health, elderly care and social protection.

Equity in education as the fundamental education policy goal in Australia is important not only for economic reasons – it is first and foremost a moral imperative, especially in the country that has made a promise to give all its people ‘a fair go’.

## References and further reading

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