

Achieving equity in education is contingent on clearly defining it

Pasi Sahlberg

Melbourne Graduate School of Education, University of Melbourne

pasi.sahlberg@unimelb.edu.au

Introduction

When I arrived in Australia four years ago from Finland, I was inspired by this question: How can we make Australian school education more equitable? At the time of my arrival, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), and several domestic reviews and research had pointed out the poor state of equity of Australian education. It was not that policies and strategies would have been blind to see these inequalities that had jeopardised learning and opportunities for better lives of millions young Australians. It was more about lack of clarity of what equity in education means, why it matters for the nation, and who should be held accountable for improving equity.

One of the first questions I had in mind was this: What do Australian adults think about educational equity? Do they think our school education is fair for all students? Is school education inclusive in a sense that it would offer opportunities to succeed to all kinds of learners? What does equity in education mean? Do they care about this issue at all?

Academics normally think about systematic ways to answers basic questions like those above. So did we. A national survey¹ that included more than 2,000 NSW adults explored people’s beliefs and attitudes

about educational equity. The results were unexpected, at least to me. 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 ten respondents thought equity should be either a single or dual priority in Australian education. They expected equity and excellence from school policymakers.

My takeaway was that NSW parents that constituted most of our survey respondents want more equitable education in Australia. 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. Often educational equity was seen as a synonym of equality of educational opportunity. Sometimes it meant fairness in education outcomes. People clearly have a wide range of meanings to explain what equity in education is about.

Equity in education policies

“I’ll guarantee, if you walk into any pet shop in Australia, the resident galah will be talking about educational equity.” This expectation is borrowed and adapted to this context from former Prime Minister Paul Keating who pointed out the fashionable

¹ <https://www.gie.unsw.edu.au/sites/default/files/documents/Equity%20Paper%20-%20Long%20Version%20Final%20V13.pdf>

role that microeconomics had in public debates in the 1990s.

Equity in education has become a key national goal for schooling during the past decade or so. The OECD² coordinates the well-known PISA survey, and advises governments to give equity similar high priority in education policies as they give to excellence. Equity is also one of the main goals in the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration (AGDE 2020). “Our vision is for a world-class education system that encourages and supports every student to be the very best they can be,” the Alice Springs Declaration states, “no matter where they live or what kind of learning challenges they may face.” The first goal of the declaration is to promote excellence and equity.

In short, it is becoming clear that a world-class education system is hard to achieve without smarter investments in equity of education. It is difficult to think of a stronger commitment to making education fairer and more inclusive than the promise made to all Australian children by every minister of education in this country.

Australia is by no means a forerunner in having equity at the centre of national education policies. Around the world, equity is frequently mentioned in national education policies, often by assuming that strengthening equity will contribute to better performing education systems in general. All Nordic countries have designed their education policies on the basic values of equality, fairness, and inclusion. Scotland, Wales, Ireland, New Zealand, many Canadian provinces, and some US states (especially California) have made significant progress recently in addressing inequalities

in school education through new policies and legislations.

But equity remains a complicated and multifaceted concept. Therefore, it has not been clearly defined in education policy documents, 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.”

Australia has a long and proud tradition of egalitarianism. The idea of “a fair go for all” is part of the national ethos. It is the foundation for a whole raft of social policies, including education, to support the less privileged in society. As our survey showed, most of us want education to be equitable. It is prominent in successive statements of the national goals of schooling, in major education policy documents, and in public discussion of education policy and funding. Education ministers and their officials around the country espouse equity as a policy priority in stronger ways than before.

Equity remains undefined

However, equity in education is an elusive concept. It is interpreted in public policies and reviews in a variety of ways. Fairness, inclusion, social justice, non-discrimination, and equal opportunity are examples of terms used variously in the context of equity.

² <https://www.oecd.org/education/equity-in-education-9789264073234-en.htm>

Despite being laudable principles, they do not provide an operational guide for what equity means for the practice of education policy, how it is assessed, and how progress in improving equity can be measured.

For example, take the goal of equality of educational opportunity. It has widespread community support for good reason as it expresses the desire for a more egalitarian education system. It is adopted in the Commitment to Action of the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Declaration. (AGDE 2020) However, equality of educational opportunity is indeterminate as it is difficult to compare education opportunities across individuals or social groups, unlike height, income, or age. This difficulty has resulted in a range of interpretations, most notably equal access to education, equal instruction for all students, equal resources for all students, and equal outcomes for all students — none of which provides effective guidance to education policy development and school funding.

Other national public policy documents also fail to clearly define equity. The National School Reform Agreement,³ currently being reviewed by the Productivity Commission, sets the objective that Australian schooling provides a high quality and equitable education for all students. The Productivity Commission's Interim Review (APC 2022) of the current National School Reform Agreement (NSRA) didn't define what is an equitable education for every child in Australia. The Final Review (APC 2023a) of the NSRA provides much more comprehensive definition for equity in education and how it could be included in new education policies and reforms.

It is important to untangle this elusiveness in the next National School Reform Agreements. Achieving more equitable education should start by making clear what educational equity means.

First, if we don't clearly define what we are trying to achieve, no path will take us there. Instead, we continue to implement new education reforms at the same time as many students are denied an adequate education, and achievement gaps between privileged and less privileged students continue to grow.

Second, the lack of a clear goal allows governments to avoid accountability and to scapegoat schools, teachers, and parents for the lack of progress in improving learning for all. Just recall the slandering of public school teachers (Karp 2022) by the former Commonwealth Acting Minister for Education, Stuart Robert, and the abominable insult of low socio-economic status parents by former NSW Minister, Pru Goward (Anon 2021).

Third, it also allows governments of all kinds to misdirect large funding increases to the more privileged private schools and deny adequate funding for most of the low socio-economic status, Indigenous, remote area, and disability students who attend public schools. This has been the story of government funding policies for decades. Absence of a clear equity goal has been a contributing factor to that inconvenient truth. It has thereby also contributed to the failure to address the large achievement gaps between rich and poor.

Clearly, there is a pressing need to clarify what we mean by equity in education. We need to answer the following three ques-

³ <https://www.education.gov.au/quality-schools-package/resources/national-school-reform-agreement>

tions: What is equity in education? Why does equity in education matter for all of us? How can we monitor the progress in equitable education?

What is equity in education?

It is easy to criticise the state of the current situation; it is much harder to suggest improvements. Recently my colleague Trevor Cobbold, an economist who serves as a National Convenor of Save Our Schools, and I have devised a unique definition of equity in education that resolves the current lack of clarity as well as provide a way to measure progress on equity.

We have proposed a dual equity objective focussed on education outcomes: Individual and Social (Sahlberg & Cobbold 2021). It has regard for both the minimum levels of achievement expected for all students and the education achievements of students from different social groups. Equity in education means that:

- All children achieve a minimum standard of education that enables them to fully participate in adult society in ways of their choosing;
- Children from different social groups achieve a similar level and range of outcomes.

We call the first objective an *adequate* education. This means that all students should achieve at least a minimum level of education that gives them the capacity to function as independent adults and to participate effectively in society. It also means that all children have the right to high quality education that equips them with the knowledge, understandings, and skills to create their own meaning in the world, to choose their own path in society as adults

and to take an active part in shaping the development of society. This is a matter of human right and justice for all individuals. Today, this requires all children to at least complete Year 12 or its equivalent.

However, even if all students achieved the minimum education threshold (i.e., 12 years of school education, or national minimum standard in literacy and numeracy) it would not be enough to achieve full equity. Average outcomes of students from high socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds could still be much higher than minority and low SES students — for example, even if all students in the latter groups achieved the minimum standard. Minority and low-SES students could be clustered just above the minimum standard while high-SES students are clustered well above the standard. Student outcomes would still not be free of differences arising from different backgrounds and outcomes for minority and low-SES students would not necessarily match the outcomes of other students.

The second objective is necessary to achieve better equity in education. We call this objective *social equity*. It means equality of outcomes by gender, class, race, ethnicity, and domicile. These groups of students should achieve similar average outcomes and a similar range of outcomes above the minimum standard as shown in Figure 1.

It is not reasonable or realistic to expect that education policy should aim to ensure that all children achieve the same education outcomes because, as individuals, they have a range of abilities and talents which lead to different choices in schooling. However, it is reasonable to expect that these different abilities and talents are distributed similarly across different social, ethnic and gender groups in society.

Shift to equitable education

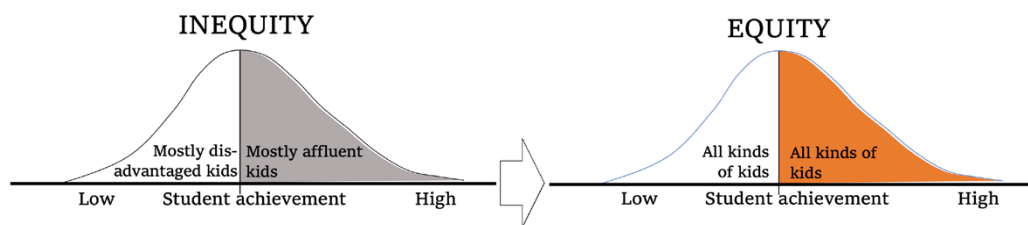


Figure 1. Towards social equity of education outcomes

There is no reason to consider, for example, that some groups of students are innately less intelligent or capable of learning than their peers from well-off privileged families. Females are not innately less intelligent than males, Indigenous students are capable of succeeding in school as well as white students, and low-SES students are not innately worse students than high-SES students. Therefore, we should expect that students in different social, cultural, and socioeconomic groups all achieve similar education outcomes as do affluent students.

Why does equity in education matter for all of us?

Some think that equity is only about those who have less, or need special support to succeed. Consequently, equity is seen as something that only benefits some at the expense of the rest. But it is wrong to believe that.

Educators and economists alike know that equity in education matters for us all. It not only matters for individual lives or for communities, but it also benefits the economy and strengthens our democratic system. It is a widely accepted premise that equity in education is fundamental to an egalitarian, democratic nation. It is therefore in society's deep interest to ensure that

all children receive an adequate education. Every time children do not achieve adequate education, individual harm is done and social waste is incurred. This means that human talents that could contribute to society are not recognised or fostered.

By failing to recognise and develop those talents through an adequate education, society incurs lost opportunities for its own advancement and human development that, in turn, are often associated with growing inequalities in societies. These costs include higher youth unemployment, lower earnings, lower productivity and economic growth, higher health care and crime costs, reduced tax revenues, and higher welfare expenditure.

Social equity in education is fundamental to an egalitarian society, too. Large disparities in education outcomes mean that the social group into which individuals are born strongly affects their life opportunities and happiness. Large disparities in school outcomes according to different social backgrounds entrench inequality and discrimination in society. Students from more privileged backgrounds have greater access to higher incomes, higher status occupations and positions of wealth, influence, and power in society than do students from more disadvantaged backgrounds.

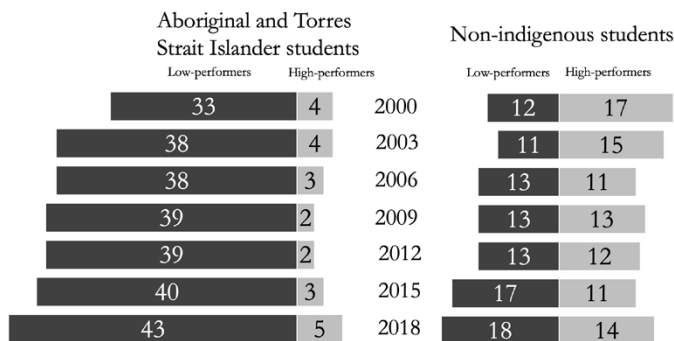


Figure 2. Percentage of low- and high-achieving 15-year-old students on the reading literacy proficiency PISA scale since 2000 (data source: Australian Council for Educational Research)

How can we monitor the progress in equitable education?

The definition of educational equity offered here provides a clear guide for monitoring progress towards achieving equity in Australian education. It requires more precise information about progress made towards adequate education and social equity simultaneously. The benchmark for educational equity is the achievement and attainment of the most successful social group of students. International and national test results together with Year 12 results show this benchmark is students from higher-SES families.

Now, Australia has an inequitable school system. This conclusion is based on both national and international data. Evidence from various sources suggest that we are currently failing to provide an adequate education for all, and that school outcomes by students’ gender, class, race, ethnicity, and domicile vary greatly. In other words, we struggle with having social equity in education. According to the Report on Government Services (APC 2023b), only about three-quarters of the estimated Year

12 population complete Year 12 in 2020. Both the OECD’s PISA and the NAPLAN results for 2022 (ACARA 2022) show very large achievement gaps of three to four years of learning between Year 9 high-SES students and low-SES and Indigenous students (Figure 2). The PISA 2018 results⁴ showed that students from highest SES quartile were nearly three years ahead of students from the lowest SES quartile in reading, about four years ahead of Indigenous students and about three and a half years ahead of remote-area students. In many areas these achievement gaps have worsened rather than narrowed over time.

There is room to improve reporting on progress towards equity in education. As we pointed out in our submission to the Productivity Commission inquiry on the National School Reform Agreement (Sahlberg & Cobbold 2022), there are significant gaps in reporting on outcomes by equity group. For example, government reporting on targets set in the Agreement are deficient in reporting outcomes for all equity groups. Reporting of Year 12 outcomes are similarly deficient. Similarly, data collected during NAPLAN tests about students’ life circum-

⁴ https://www.oecd.org/pisa/Combined_Executive_Summaries_PISA_2018.pdf

stances including their family backgrounds is not rich enough to make more accurate conclusions about social equity. Data collections need to be upgraded to adequately assess the effectiveness of policy initiatives and progress in improving equity in education.

Defining equity is the first step to achieving it

Ten years ago the Gonski Report on school funding adopted the equity goal that “differences in educational outcomes are not the result of differences in wealth, income, power or possessions” (AGDE 2011). Clearly defining equity is the first step towards achieving it. The definition of equity offered above gives operational effect to this principle. It provides the first step in achieving equity in education.

I believe that a dual goal of equity in education is eminently justifiable. It guarantees a threshold level of education for everyone and a fair or equitable distribution of the benefits of education for all social groups. It should be a key national goal of schooling. It would provide the framework for policy making and a clear measurable approach to assessing progress towards achieving equity in education.

No doubt these are challenging goals. Differential access to education blights a democratic society. There is no society of equals where members of a minority monopolise high-education outcomes by virtue of their wealth, position, or power in the society. In a democracy, education outcomes should not depend on students’ family background and their parents, power, position, or wealth. The continuing absence of a clearer definition of educational equity means we will continue to make little, or

no, progress in keeping the promise of high-quality school education for every Australian child.

The next step forward is to set equity and excellence in education as a national goal. The next National School Reform Agreement could offer to the states and territories a clear, practical definition of equity in education that would better guide education policy and school funding, and monitor progress in improving equity and quality of Australian education.

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