

Increasing Equity in Education for All Students

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Abstract

One of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals recognizes that inclusive and equitable education is of benefit to our global society. This article explores the potential problems to achieving equitable access to education globally, and in Manitoba. It considers how educational institutions can recognise their roles in perpetuating inequities, and how effective financial investments and the inclusion of all stakeholders can lead to positive change for all students. The goal is to challenge educators to reflect on their practice, and to ensure increased access to equitable education.

Equity in education involves a combination of fairness, inclusion and investment in education to ensure each student has what they need to reach their potential. Increasing equity in education is part of an acknowledgement that access to systems, including health care and government, increases global equality and leads to improved standards of living (United Nations, n.d.). Before improvements can happen, educational institutions need to solve problems that can affect attempts to achieve equity. Sometimes educational institutions doubt that commonly used philosophies to increase equity, such as inclusion,¹ are helpful (del Pozo-Armentia et al., 2020).

Many educational institutions are unable to understand the idea that clear and deliberate attention should be directed at attempts to achieve equity (Lenhoff, 2020). Educators and educational institutions often fail to understand the demands of those seeking equity (Powell, 2020). The second problem is financing attempts to increase educational equity for identified groups (Lee, 2012). Insufficient financial commitments to equity undermine attempts to achieve equity. To deepen the complexity of the situation, not all stakeholders² within communities are included in wider discussions regarding access to equity (Palmquist, 2020).

Educational Institutions' Good Intentions

The problem of educational institutions failings in perpetuating inequities includes commitments to unproven or unresearched philosophies, failure to direct clear attention to attempts at equity, and misunderstanding of equitable demands. An implicit understanding of what educational inequity is seems to be assumed and is informing many institutional attempts to create equity (Keddie & Holloway, 2020). Adherence to theories such as inclusion, can lead to uncritical acceptance of their pedagogical limitations (del Pozo-Armentia et al., 2020). When following theories including inclusion and growth mindset, many schools do not conduct any research into how these solutions could possibly increase equity, or contribute to inequities in education (Ching et al., 2020). Pedagogical disagreement in educational institutions can be observed when preparing students for post-secondary choices (Liou & Rojas, 2020). Educational institutions can undermine equity unintentionally. Student disengagement can begin with well-meaning attempts to recruit students for programs, such as credit-recovery, designed to overcome inequity (Powell, 2020). Sometimes all parents/guardians do not support attempts

¹ Inclusion in education involves giving each individual equal opportunity for educational progress.

² Stakeholders identified in education should be anyone with a direct interest in an educational institution, including financial and human interests.

to increase equity, in fact sometimes insisting on access to such programs for their own children (Powell, 2020). Examples from higher education show that programs designed to increase equity for identified groups have limited enrolment (Dias Lopes, 2020). Students are affected as learners by educational institutions' and communities' inability to articulate what inequity is, what equity should be, and what it should lead toward (Ching et al., 2020).

A Need for Financial Support

The lack of access to financial resources can have a huge effect when attempting to achieve equity in education. Educational institutions can often fail to recognise how they support the reproduction of financial privilege (Gayton, 2020). Some institutions have widened access to educational opportunities, but there is a variation in the quality of instruction (Wu et al., 2020). Financial investments in teaching and learning methods should be considered. Ultimately, education institutions are meritocratic systems wherein there is no possibility for mobility and equity, or even income distribution, is impossible (del Pozo-Armentia et al., 2020). Even where private or community institutions have invested in schools, there has been inequity in the distribution of finances (Keddie & Holloway, 2020). Faced with such contradictions, it is no surprise that money is not effectively directed to increasing equitable access and achievement in education.

The Need To Involve All Stakeholders

Educational institutions sometimes do not listen to community voices, so attempts at equity are pursued without the involvement of all stakeholders (Winnipeg Indigenous Executive Circle, 2020). Many stakeholders have called for equity in staffing, including Winnipeg communities (Liou & Rojas, 2020). Vague notions are sometimes followed when developing educational opportunities without any attempt to understand the community itself (Toulouse, 2016). Even in post-secondary institutions, students can find it hard to adjust to cultural ideas of education (Gayton, 2020), which can affect their engagement. Sometimes community stakeholders can be ignored, continuing the inequity (Toulouse, 2016). Educators also often feel ignored, which frustrates positive discussion with local communities regarding education (Gallagher, 2016). There is also a need to ensure accountability when stakeholders do invest in schools (Keddie & Holloway, 2020). Full community involvement is essential when making decisions about education, educational success, and educational philosophies.

Institutional Reflection and Commitment to Equity

In education, as in other public sectors such as health, there is a need for institutions and structures to reflect and examine the system's function and desired outcomes. Such needs assessments should involve all stakeholders (Palmquist, 2020, p. 402). In 2020, we are seeing a rise in awareness of equity issues regarding race, but we must continue to explore other equity issues, such as gender (Keddie, 2020). When examining inclusion as a philosophy of equity, there should be an understanding that results achieved will not be equal and that excellence will be achieved by only a few (del Pozo-Armentia et al., 2020). A realistic assessment of the philosophies and methods of equity gives reason for educational systems to look beyond the safety of the institution itself. To try to increase equity, institutions have used learning analytics to inform decisions (Francis et al., 2020). It is important for all stakeholders to be involved, in order to ensure practical analysis of the results. With all stakeholders involved, educational institutions should be able to avoid becoming fixed on single delivery means and other ideas, including Indigenous world-views (Toulouse, 2016).

Financing Equity

The lack of access to financial resources has affected attempts to achieve educational equity. Harnessing community-based organizations (CBOs) and CBO alliances can make significant differences to money. Indeed, it is a witness to the power of such groups that equity has been continually spotlighted in the last 25 years (Lemke, 2020). CBOs or other community involvement can make the difference between half-hearted attempts to achieve equity and meaningful programming that is developed in schools (Gallagher, 2016). CBOs may have success advocating for equitable access to schools of choice. It has been seen that open access to all schools can lead to outcomes such as achieving desired employment, further education, and life ambitions (Lenhoff, 2020). If CBOs can be used effectively to lobby for financing to explicitly achieve equity in access to better quality education, then health care outcomes and other social fields may see increases in equity (Keddie & Holloway, 2020). Educational institutions can be misled into thinking that the achievement of a diverse student and staff population in schools will lead to educational equity, but they should focus specifically on achieving equity for marginalized communities (Mann et al., 2020). In post-secondary institutions, there can be doubts regarding the purpose of equity. The idea of cultural capital should be explored, but often this is trumped by criticism of students being poorly prepared for challenging courses. Such courses include those requiring large amount of complex technical knowledge and understanding of detailed formulas and procedures. In universities, this can lead to increased spending on students, leading to scrutiny of the worth of encouraging diverse access to education (Gao & Liu, 2020). Analysis of the effectiveness of financial investments in teaching and learning methods should be considered as part of achieving equity.

Responding to all Stakeholders

Educational communities need to form consistent goals that will demonstrate increases in equity (Ching et al., 2020). Some research calls for post-secondary institutions to search for top-down solutions to equity (Francis et al., 2020). Other researchers have indicated that only bottom-up approaches to equity work (Gallagher, 2016). There should be closer ties between higher education and schools. For example, clear accountability in defining equitable goals, such as access to higher education, beyond nebulous ideas of relationship building is important to their success (Liou & Rojas, 2020). There is some evidence that community involvement can change this, with time spent following policies and deliberately targeted interventions so that students can see themselves represented in positions of power. This can have a powerful effect on students (Liou & Rojas, 2020). Collaborative efforts among advocates, CBOs, and educational institutions remain a promising way to improve community participation and monitoring in health, encouraging equitable mobility in positions of governance (Palmquist, 2020). In a similar way, educational institutions and systems need to encourage businesses to be part of an audit of education (World Economic Forum, 2020). Prioritized spending on education for employees and the addition of high-quality staff should be goals.

Conclusion

The lasting problems of inequity in education are often not understood, and are therefore perpetuated in local communities, including Winnipeg communities, in negative ways. Many educational institutions need to recognise their own role in sustaining inequity (Powell, 2020). Educational institutions should be aware of the role of financial investments to increase wider societal equity through education (Gayton, 2020). All stakeholders should actively listen to community voices, and show awareness of the impact of historical events on communities' potential to increase equity in education (Toulouse, 2016). In conclusion, there is some need for more research in equitable education, but there is enough evidence to understand that there is

an exciting opportunity for change through education. All educators can agree to reflect and refine our practice in order to improve equity in education.

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