



Understanding equity in education.

Part 2: What can we do?



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Dr Pasi Sahlberg

Professor of Education, Southern
Cross University

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In his second article in a two-part series, Dr Pasi Sahlberg considers the power of family background on student learning and suggests practical ways that schools can strengthen equity of education.

Ever since students' performance in school has been measured by standardised assessments, one question has trumped all others: What explains variability in these tests?

The question really is, why are some students more successful in school than other students? Some parents think that their children don't work hard enough for success in school. There are authorities who think that students' success in school depends directly on how good or bad the teachers are. Students may believe that their learning outcomes vary because some students are simply smarter learners.

Whatever the answer is, our aim must be clear. In the [Alice Springs \(Mparntwe\) Education Declaration](#),

education ministers have promised to improve learning outcomes of each and every student in Australia. This means that we need to do more to strengthen equity in education.

We need better data to evaluate equity

Understanding what educational equity looks like in practice requires reliable information about individual students' learning outcomes and some background data about these students' life circumstances. As it is now, there is systematic and comparable data in Australia about student achievement in literacy and numeracy, and also in scientific literacy via international student assessments. Because NAPLAN data don't include enough information about students' family backgrounds, not much can be said about the equity of these outcomes.

The tests like NAPLAN that are used to evaluate student achievement must be sound measures of what students know and are able to do. When individual student achievement is linked to information about the student's family background (or socio-economic status), basic indexes of equity of education outcomes can be created. Measuring equity of education outcomes requires estimating the strength of the relationship between students' family background and their respective tests scores.

Good tests that measure student achievement should be capable of providing score comparisons between different students. The more these outcomes are associated with students' family background, the less equitable education becomes. As we saw in [Part 1 \(PDF 6.9 MB\)](#), equity in education requires that students in different social groups have similar learning outcomes and that the range of these outcomes is similar across different social groups.

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The power of family background

Over the past 50 years, research has shown us that family background is a far more important factor in explaining student learning than people often think. Stanford University professor Edward Haertel (2013) concluded that outside of school factors account for about 60% of the variability in students' test scores in school. David Berliner (2014) and many other scholars have come to similar conclusions.

An important consequence of this conclusion is that – since school-specific factors account for about 20% of the variability in students' test results (and another 20% of the total variability remains unexplained) – the best opportunities for improving quality and equity of education outcomes are found in system-level conditions (American Statistical Association, 2014). Most importantly, schools alone can't fix existing education inequities in our schools.

Learning happens everywhere, not only in schools. Hobbies, recreational activities, civic engagement, and community learning settings are examples of out of school places to learn. Digital technologies at home offer another way to learn something that previously was taught in school. During school age, children spend about 15% of their time in school. School is an important place to learn but it is not the only place learning can happen.

What can we do?

Make no mistake, schools can do a lot to help all students thrive in school. Here is something to get started with equity improvement.

First, make sure that teachers, parents and students have a similar understanding of what equity in education means. For many people, it is synonymous with equality of educational opportunities, which can lead to misconceptions about equity (see Part 1). Then, help everyone to realise why equity matters, not just for some students but for all of them. Evidence suggests that when equity of outcomes becomes stronger, the overall quality of education also improves. Finally, avoid using equity as a fashionable term in school improvement plans without understandable meaning. Instead, turn it into concrete operations that includes teachers,

students, parents and the community so that progress in equity can be monitored and evaluated.

When everyone understands better what equity means, why it matters, and what it could look like, go and revisit – and, if necessary, redesign – structures or operations in your school to positively influence equity.

Here are three examples:

1. Adopt a whole child approach to education

The key idea in a whole child approach to education is to change the focus of education from narrowly defined academic achievement of literacy and numeracy to one that values broader learning and long-term development through arts, music, physical activity, and play. A whole child approach assumes that students' education outcomes depend on their access to rich and safe learning environments in school, at home and in the community.

A whole child approach to teaching and learning can fundamentally change students' educational experiences. In practice, this means redesigning curriculum, instruction, and assessments so that they support the needs and interests of every child. Strengthening positive relationships within schools and enhancing communication between school and the community will further strengthen students' belonging, wellbeing and learning in school.

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2. Provide active early intervention to support students with additional learning needs

Students come to school with different expectations and needs. Most schools have set up different services to help students by addressing these needs. Some of these needs are directly educational, some may be linked to students' wellbeing and health. The earlier the intervention happens, the better its impact will be on children and equity of education.

Those schools that have different early intervention mechanisms in place often monitor and assess individual students' health, wellbeing and learning during their schooling. Regular health checks, daily meals, regular recess during school days, and wellbeing teams are examples of structures in schools that wish to address educational equities through early intervention and targeted support to students. Close collaboration between teachers and parents is important in understanding what different students need to succeed in school.

3. Tell students that it takes more than grit to succeed in school

How often do we convince our students that success in school requires hard work? Contemporary individual development trends suggest that intelligence is not fixed or inherited and that through grit and 'growth mindset' it can be grown like a muscle. If students would only work harder, would that be a way to more equitable education? Not so fast, research suggests.

A study conducted at Harvard University (Gonzalez et al., 2022) reveals that it is not enough to believe that grit and hard work would lead to success in an increasingly unequal

world. The study suggests that, instead, we need candid conversations with children and young people about how social barriers in many students' lives can block success, and how they can break down some of these barriers. Making students believe that it is only hard work that leads to success may lead them to think that not making the mark is a consequence of not trying hard enough. That may make already unequal situations even worse.

Ashely Whillans explained this in an interview to Michael Blanding (2022):

If you are learning that effort is the way to achieve success, and you see people who have less, you might assume they didn't work hard enough – as opposed to recognizing the systems and institutions we know can stand in the way.

We should help students to understand this reality. Parents and teachers ought to explain that students have different conditions and opportunities to learn

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at home, and that the starting point to learning at school is not the same for all.

Small steps can pave the way

Some say that schools change slowly. This is true if we try to do that alone. Teachers, principals, parents, policymakers, community leaders and students together can do better than we do now. But it takes all of us together to work for that better and fairer future by implementing small but meaningful improvements in our ingrained systems (Gonski Institute for Education, 2020).

As an African proverb says, 'If you think you are too small to make a difference, you haven't spent the night with a mosquito'.

References and further reading

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