

SAVE OUR SCHOOLS

Education Policy Brief

What is Equity in Education?

The panel conducting the Review of School Funding inquiry has stated its intention to focus on educational equity as a key issue in its review. It has adopted a sound definition of equity: “...equity should ensure that differences in educational outcomes are not the result of differences in wealth, income, power or possessions”.

A critical question is how this definition should be interpreted. This brief proposes that equity in education should refer to equity in outcomes and incorporate both an individual and a social aspect.

From an individual perspective, equity in education outcomes should mean that all children receive an adequate education. From a social perspective, equity in education should mean that children from different social groups achieve similar average results. However, equity in education outcomes does not mean that all children should be expected to achieve the same results.

Equity in education outcomes

Historically, many discussions of equity in education have focussed on inputs into education such as physical and human resources or the funding required to provide such resources. Some see educational equity as meaning equal educational resources or inputs for all students, for which per-student expenditure is often considered a proxy.

However, students are different in terms of what they need to reach any particular level of achievement. Some students will achieve at much lower levels at a given input level than others because they come from a disadvantaged social environment or because they have special educational needs.

It is educational outcomes rather than inputs which are the ultimate focus of education policy goals. Inputs to education are a means to an end, namely, the education outcomes expected for all children in modern society. Because the needs of students differ, equity in education is likely to require unequal resources applied to different students to obtain expected outcomes. To give priority to equity in education inputs for students is to pursue a goal of inequity in education outcomes.

The Review committee’s definition of equity clearly sees it in terms of education outcomes. This is a sound approach. However, its definition needs to be expanded upon to provide clear direction for education policy and school funding. This brief proposes that equity in education should comprise a dual objective:

- All children should receive an adequate education; and
- Children from different social groups should achieve similar average results.

An adequate education for all

A key component of equity in education is the goal that all children should receive a minimum education required to make their own way as adults in society and to contribute to that society. This can be viewed as a democratic minimum or threshold in education. In some

discussions, it is referred to as an “adequate education”, a concept that has played a key role in recent court decisions in the United States about the funding of public education.

Society has a moral obligation to ensure that all children receive an adequate education. Indeed, the moral authority of a society that calls itself a democracy depends in no small part on providing all its citizens with an adequate education. It is a matter of justice and a moral obligation of society that all children should receive a minimum formal education required to make their own way as adults in society and to contribute to society.

It is also in society’s interest to ensure that all children receive an adequate education. Social waste is incurred if some children do not receive an adequate education. It means that human talents that could contribute to society are not fostered. All children have talents that can be realised through education and formal learning. By failing to develop those talents, society incurs lost opportunities for its development and enrichment.

Further social waste is incurred by the long-term social and financial costs of inadequate education. Inadequate education for some leads to large public and social costs in the form of lower income and economic growth, reduced tax revenues, and higher costs of health care, social security and crime.

In today’s society, an adequate education should mean successful completion of Year 12 or its equivalent. Those who do not complete Year 12 are to a large extent cut off from further education and training and have limited future employment prospects. All students should complete Year 12 to gain the knowledge and skills they require to enter the workforce or to go on to further education in TAFE or university.

Australia has a long way to go in ensuring an adequate education for all children. Many students are not achieving international proficiency benchmarks and many are not completing Year 12. About 14% of 15 year-old students did not achieve the international benchmarks in reading, mathematics and science in the OECD’s 2009 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). There has been no reduction in this proportion since the PISA 2000 results. Over 30% of students do not complete Year 12 and this proportion has increased slightly since 2000.

Students from different social groups should achieve similar outcomes

Whatever the minimum threshold adopted, the distribution of education outcomes between different social groups has a key bearing on access to occupations and positions of power in society. Even if all young people achieve the threshold, large inequalities in outcomes above the threshold can still occur between social groups and differentially affect the life chances of individuals according to their membership of social groups.

Some groups of students may continue to obtain a lesser education than more privileged groups because their average results are significantly below those of other groups. For example, average outcomes of students from high socio-economic status (SES) families could still be much higher than for those from low SES families if high SES students continue to comprise a disproportionate number of those achieving at the higher levels of attainment while low SES students are clustered just above the minimum threshold. In these circumstances, high SES students will remain a privileged social group in terms of access to higher education and the higher paying occupations and status positions in society.

Equity in education therefore should also mean that students from different social groups achieve similar average results as well as the minimum threshold level of attainment expected for all students. There is no reason in principle to consider that innate intelligence and talents of low SES, Indigenous, ethnic and remote area students are somehow less than those of high SES students. No social, racial or geographic group of students is innately more intelligent or talented than others.

However, there are large differences in school outcomes in Australia between rich and poor students, between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students and between remote area and metropolitan students.

The 2009 PISA results show that, on average, low SES 15 year-old students are two to three years behind high SES students in reading, mathematics and science. Results from PISA 2003 and 2006 show that low SES students enrolled in schools with a high proportion of students from low SES families are nearly four years behind students from high income families in high SES schools.

Fifteen year-old Indigenous students are 2-2½ years behind non-Indigenous students and are three to four years behind high SES students. Remote and very remote area students are about 18 months in learning behind metropolitan students, and are two to three years behind high SES students.

The proportion of high SES students achieving the highest proficiency levels is about 5 times that of low SES students. In 2009, only 5% of low SES students achieved the highest reading proficiency standard compared with 24% of high SES students. In mathematics, the respective proportions were 6% and 30% and in science it was 6% compared to 28%.

There are also large differences in school completion rates for students from different social groups. The proportion of low SES students who fail to complete Year 12 is nearly double that of high SES students. In 2008, 42% of low SES students and 49% of remote area students failed to complete Year 12 compared to 23% of students from high SES families. About 55% of Indigenous students enrolled in Years 7/8 fail to progress through to Year 12.

Eliminating these large inequities in school outcomes is the biggest challenge facing Australian education today.

However, achieving equity in education does not mean that all students should achieve exactly the same outcomes. While all students should achieve an adequate education, it will involve different results for individual students. Social equity in education means that students from different social groups should have similar results in terms of group averages. This will involve different results for students within each group, with some in each group achieving higher results and some around the minimum threshold.

Equality of opportunity in education

The goal of equity in education outcomes is a more socially just one than the commonly advocated goal of equality of opportunity.

Equality of opportunity has long been the goal of those striving for a more democratic education system and to extend education to vast numbers of people previously excluded from extended schooling. Traditionally, it has been interpreted as providing all students with

the opportunity to pursue their talents. The strong value behind this idea is that the quality of education received by each child should not be dependent on the level of wealth and education his or her family.

However, there is also a strong meritocratic aspect to this idea. Equal opportunity in education involved the removal of hindrances to the development of individual talent and diligence, irrespective of social origin. The most able must be identified and educated to the hilt of their potential, quite irrespective of their social origins. Its core belief is that everyone should have an equal opportunity to succeed and have access to the highest status occupations and positions of power and influence. It is the role of the education system to identify these talented people.

If everyone has a chance, according to the rules, to win the prize in open competition with their peers, then winners (and losers) deserve what they have earned. Everyone has had an equal opportunity to fulfil their potential. In this sense, equality of opportunity means equal chances to become unequal.

The idea of equality of opportunity is often seen as providing the opportunities to learn without reference to the outcomes. It does not require any particular level of achievement for all students. It is also consistent with wide inequalities in outcomes between students from different social backgrounds. Students are given the opportunity to find success and if they fail to take up these opportunities it is attributed to their lack of talent or motivation. Those who do not succeed are judged to be not capable of succeeding. As a result, many see the concept equality of opportunity in education as inherently flawed and fundamentally unjust.

As such, equality of educational opportunity is a recipe for continuing inequity. It is a fundamentally unjust principle. Adoption of equality of opportunity as an education goal fails to challenge the massive social inequities in education. As a result, these inequalities may be legitimised as the natural order of things.

Despite these criticisms, the idea of equality of opportunity has a strong resonance in the community as the right of all children to have a successful education to a high level, irrespective of family background. It can be viewed not just as providing the opportunity to succeed at school but the opportunity to succeed in life. It should be seen as the equality of opportunity to participate fully in adult society or equality of opportunity in future prospects. Such an interpretation of equality of opportunity is not dissimilar to the idea of providing each child with the capacities needed for adulthood and participation in modern society. Nor is it inconsistent with the idea that students from different social groups should have similar prospects as adults.

Conclusion

Equity in education outcomes should be seen as a dual objective incorporating both individual and social equity. Achievement of a minimum threshold level of education for all students should be a fundamental goal of public education. However, this is not enough to achieve equity in education. Achieving social equity in education should also be a fundamental goal. This means that low SES, Indigenous, ethnic and provincial and remote area students should achieve similar outcomes to students from high SES families.

The School Funding Review should adopt this dual equity objective and design a funding model to achieve it. Achieving equity in education is a demanding goal given existing

inequalities in outcomes. It will require a substantial boost in funding for government schools because they enrol the vast majority of low SES, Indigenous and remote area students.

Trevor Cobbold
National Convenor
1 March 2011

SOS - Fighting for Equity in Education

<http://www.saveourschools.com.au>