

# Equality in Education

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**ABSTRACT:** This article explores the multifaceted concept of equality in education, tracing its roots to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. The discussion delves into the complexities of implementing equality, considering access, learning processes, educational outcomes, and external results. Four distinct areas of applicability are identified, with a particular focus on the Eastern-European context. The article critically examines the potential tension between achieving equality and maintaining the quality of education, as suggested in the UNICEF paper. Additionally, it proposes an alternative model of implementation grounded in a relational approach at the personal, communal, and societal levels. This relational endeavor emphasizes recognizing biases, opposing unequal treatment, and challenging discriminatory traditions, offering a nuanced perspective on the practical implementation of equality in education.

**KEYWORDS:** Equality, education, human rights, learning processes, discrimination, societal change

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## Introduction

On December 10, 1948, the General Assembly of the United Nations took a historic step by adopting the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, a landmark document that consecrates “equality” as the foundational principle in the modern understanding of human liberties and entitlements. While affirming the “inherent dignity” and the “equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family” (United Nations 1998, 471), the declaration was intended to set a course for what was hoped to become an era of improved humanity, characterized by

freedom, justice, and peace worldwide. Little did the original signatories of this declaration anticipate that more than half a century later, discussions about equality and freedom would not only persist but become increasingly pertinent. We find ourselves in a world where the lofty ideals outlined in the declaration have yet to witness widespread and felicitous implementation (Maples 2014, 13–28). One of the dimensions of contemporary life where this disparity is evident is the realm of education, a sector explicitly addressed in Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Hongzhi et al. 2014, 1–8). While the declaration mandates equal access to education, laws translating and regulating this principle within the Eastern-European arena have emerged only in recent decades and are far from being thoroughly implemented (Bowl 2018, 21–50). Indeed, the continued interest in this topic underscores the fact that the pursuit of equality in education remains far from settled (Miller 2023, 1–2; Cin 2017, 1–18). This article aims to add to the discussion on equality in education, specifically focusing on possibilities for practical implementation in our society.

## Definitions

Before engaging in a discussion on “equality in education”, a basic understanding of the terms “equality” and “education” as used in this paper is necessary. As argued below, the definitions we will provide set the stage for a nuanced exploration of “equality in education”, recognizing the multi-dimensional nature of both terms in the context of our discussion.

The term “equality” has its origins in the realm of mathematics, where it denotes complete equivalence between quantifiable variables. In a mathematical context, equality implies a perfect correspondence between measurable entities such as weight, amount, length, or quantity. However, we suggest that within the context of human rights, the concept of equality extends beyond the realm of quantifiable variables; it also refers to comparisons between variables of ordinal nature. Thus, equality may also refer to non-measurable characteristics like beauty, ability, or smartness.

When applied to education, however, the concept of “equality” transcends both quantifiable and non-measurable domains (see McCaig et al. 2018, 195–210). No doubt, at a basic level, equality will involve considerations of age, funding, or resources – elements easily quantified. As we delve deeper into addressing intelligence, talent, preferences, or family

context, we encounter characteristics that make individuals unique. In this regard, equality in education demands fostering an environment where one's uniqueness is not a hindrance but an enrichment. In other words, equality demands that gender, race, class, nationality/ethnicity, social status, disability, and other such factors do not impede one's educational pursuits. The ensuing discussion will reflect this nuanced understanding.

The term "education" is conceptualized in this paper as a process, a cycle, comprising three sequential and repetitive steps, each integral to achieving a sense of educational completeness (see Allen 2014, 3–26). First, education serves the purpose of informing. It starts as acquisition of information, achieved through various formal and informal means. This is often a mnemonic activity, and the successful completion of this stage results in the learner's ability to accurately repeat the acquired information. Second, education is also formative, for it involves the process of interpreting information. True learning is not limited to reciting information accurately, but it must also demonstrate the ability to reproduce information using new language and structures. This step culminates in insightful correlations between the information being interpreted and existing knowledge, leading to a more comprehensive understanding. Third, the educational cycle is completed when transformation is achieved. This final step centers on applying the acquired information creatively, in new contexts and at different levels. This is the step in which education transcends simple intellectual growth. It is here that the information acquired and understood impacts one's entire existence. Such transformation signifies the full realization of education – its permanent effects upon individual and societal contexts.

### **Equality in Education – What It Entails**

Equality in education is a multifaceted endeavor, entailing nuanced considerations across four key areas of applicability (Gale 2014, 9–22). First, it is about equality of access. We argue that access is a foundational pillar of equality, especially within the context of education. It demands the fulfillment of conditions to make basic education universally available. Practical measures include the establishment of new schools, provision of additional funding for families facing economic barriers, informative programs aimed at heightening parental awareness of the importance of education, and the formulation and enforcement of laws mandating basic education for all (cf. Lynch and Baker 2005, 131–64).

Second, it is about equality throughout the learning process. This dimension of equality zeroes in on the practices of educators, emphasizing the equal attention and treatment of learners. Concrete manifestations include exposure to the same curriculum, access to identical educational materials, and the availability of educational programs of equal length and quality for all students.

Third, it stipulates equality of educational outcomes. This would mean that all learners are given the opportunity to realize their full potential (Lin 2018, 399–403). Different outcomes should result from varying levels of effort, not external factors. Practical implementation requires the elimination of any form of academic, gender, or ethnic screening, ensuring that different physical characteristics do not unfairly influence examination results.

Fourth, it aims to realize equality in terms of external results. Beyond the educational sphere, concern with equality extends to the external results of education. This dimension underscores the necessity of equal opportunities post-education, ensuring equal access to social, cultural, political, and economic benefits. It encompasses equal career opportunities, job prospects, and pay rates, fostering a society where the benefits of education are equitably distributed.

The practical application of equality in these four areas presents complex challenges. While the intent is to level the playing field, it is crucial to critically examine potential consequences and tensions, particularly concerning the quality of education, as explored in the subsequent section.

### **Equality in Education vs. Quality of Education**

The intersection of equality and quality in education raises intricate questions regarding the potential impact of one on the other (see Pfeffer 2015, 350–68). A UNICEF (2000) paper, presented at the International Working Group on Education in Florence, Italy, defines quality in education in terms of care for learners, provision of appropriate learning environments, design of relevant and qualitative curricula, well-managed pupil-centred learning processes, and outcomes involving positive societal participation.

The elements of this definition closely align with the four domains where equality is, or should be, applied, as described in the previous section. Therefore, a legitimate question we should also ponder is: does the implementation of equality jeopardize the quality of education, or can it, in fact, enhance it? We argue that the answer lies in the nuances of how equality

is implemented (cf. Thompson 2003, 218–36). Within the European context, the implementation of equality in education is done from up down. It typically starts at the governmental level, where laws and policies are designed, and extends to practitioners who put these laws and policies into practice. While this model emphasizes the laudable concept of equal treatment under the law, it may inadvertently lead to an emphasis on equal opportunities – making the same provisions for all learners, without in fact considering their unique needs, abilities, and circumstances. We argue, however, that this model can result in a lowering of learning requirements and standards to the point where all learners achieve the minimum necessary for a passing grade. As such, the quality of the educational process overall would be lowered.

Alternatively, the implementation of equality should be done in harmony with the pursuit of the highest quality, which may mean the personalization of equality implementation. For example, physical differences between individuals, such as those between boys and girls, do present a challenge (cf. Sadker and Sadker 1995); thus, provisions for the personalization of access, requirements, and assessment ought to be made to accommodate such disparities. Thus, we contend that there is a potential for tension between achieving equality and maintaining quality and that this risk can be mitigated by changing the way in which equality is implemented. The challenge is to strike a balance that ensures equal opportunities (cf. Lazenby 2016, 65–76) while respecting the individuality of learners and maintaining the highest standards of education (Boyle and Heimans 2014, 51–60). The ensuing section proposes an alternative model that posits equality as a relational endeavor, thus challenging the traditional top-down approach and fostering a more nuanced and inclusive perspective.

### **Equality as a Relational Endeavour**

We propose that if we are to achieve equality while maintaining quality in education, an alternative implementation paradigm is necessary – one that positions equality not as a bureaucratic mandate but as a relational endeavor, deeply embedded in personal, communal, and societal spheres (Boyle et al. 2014, 217–22). This alternative paradigm challenges the conventional model, where the implementation of equality commences with legislative actions and policies at the governmental level, and instead, proposes a model where equality becomes a shared responsibility at various levels of human interaction.

Firstly, at its core, the practice of equality is a relational endeavor that starts with individuals. On a personal level, it involves a conscientious effort to identify and eliminate biases and prejudices. This calls for a self-reflective process, challenging ingrained discriminatory attitudes and behaviors. Recognizing and rectifying personal biases become integral to fostering an environment conducive to equality.

Secondly, moving beyond the individual, the practice of equality extends to the immediate community level. Here, equality is not merely a personal commitment but an active opposition to any idea or action promoting unequal treatment. It entails standing against discrimination, whether directed at oneself or another member of the community. This communal stance fosters a culture where everyone actively contributes to upholding principles of equality.

Thirdly, there is the societal dimension of equality as a way of life, which challenges traditions, laws, and ideologies that perpetuate discrimination. It involves a collective rejection of any societal norms that justify unequal treatment based on specific individual characteristics or group affiliations. Embracing equality at the societal level necessitates a shared commitment to creating an inclusive and just social fabric.

Thus, we argue for the necessity of a model that challenges the conventional approach by decentralizing the responsibility of implementing equality. Rather than relying solely on legislative measures, our proposal emphasizes a relational approach (see Malone et al. 2023, 479–91) where each individual, community, and society as a whole actively participates in creating an environment where equality thrives. In the context of education, this relational practice transcends the notion of equal opportunities for all learners. Instead, it calls for understanding each individual's unique circumstances, needs, and abilities, empowering learners to reach their full potential. This alternative model advocates for a holistic and inclusive perspective, emphasizing that equality in education is not achieved through uniform provisions but through a dynamic recognition of individual specifics.

## **Conclusion**

In the present article, we have endeavored to address the complex question of equality in education by evaluating what is being done, by exploring equality as a multifaceted concept and by identifying challenges and the potential im-

pact on the quality of education. As we conclude, it is evident that the pursuit of equality in education necessitates a delicate balance. The traditional model, centered on governmental legislation, while commendable in ensuring equal treatment under the law, poses risks to the quality of education if not executed with nuance. The potential tension between equality and quality underscores the need for thoughtful implementation strategies.

The proposed alternative – a relational endeavor at the personal, communal, and societal levels – presents an inclusive vision where equality becomes a shared responsibility. This model challenges the status quo by empowering individuals and communities to actively contribute to a culture of equality. In the realm of education, it advocates for an approach that transcends uniform provisions, recognizing and accommodating the uniqueness of each learner. In embracing equality as a way of life, we advocate not for a compromise between equality and quality but for a harmonious integration. This alternative model encourages us to move beyond the dichotomy, fostering an environment where equality enriches the quality of education. As we look toward the future, the call to action is clear: a collective commitment to equality, not just as a legal mandate but as an integral part of our societal fabric, ensuring that education truly becomes a transformative force for all.

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