

How equitable is Canada's education system?

Canadian provinces have developed equity policies and systems for meeting various learner needs that include linguistic, remedial, psychosocial and other forms of support. Equity does not mean treating everyone the same way, but rather recognizing that everyone is different and adopting appropriate practices for learners' different needs and realities.

However, inequities persist for certain learners (Indigenous, refugees, the poor, visible minorities, etc.) and there are significant disparities between groups in Canada. In some provinces, there is a multi-tier system, which increases the number of selective programs and private schools. This, in turn, weakens the public school system and leads to unequal treatment benefiting those who are better off. Students with difficulties from poor backgrounds are over-represented in regular public school classes, and drop out in higher proportions. Even so, there are very few indicators to diagnose, track and measure the equity or inequities produced by the *way in which the school system or its schools operate*. Although recent studies have documented various processes and practices that have a detrimental impact on the school experience of certain minority youth, schools are not identifying and measuring these practices so they can be changed. Some examples:

- standardized evaluations ill-suited for the learner's profile, which can result in learners' needs being under-represented or under-estimated
- a cultural or linguistic bias in the evaluation instruments used and during professional assessments, which can result in academic difficulties being over- or under-estimated
- rankings or a tendency towards "special" classes, an alternative educational setting or specialized follow-up (black youth are more often identified as being "at risk" or "special needs" students)
- negative attitudes towards and perceptions of learners in certain groups (or their parents), or lower staff expectations
- disciplinary measures or penalties (more severe in the case of black youth)
- excessive supervision or, on the contrary, a failure to intervene and provide protection
- a lack of resources, access to services, appropriate practices and relevance of the knowledge acquired. For example, the drop-out rate among Aboriginal youth shows that school practices are inadequate and do not meet their needs. When it comes to immigrant youth who enter the system in the middle of high school, many students as young as age 16 are put into the adult education sector, where the services are less suited to their needs.

As we can see, there are few indicators when it comes to school practices and services that directly address data on student needs and realities. That is why new indicators must be created to measure the development of student abilities and skills vis-à-vis the threefold mission of schools: provide instruction, provide qualifications, and socialize students. Inclusive, equitable schools care about access to education as well as the manner in which it is provided, adapted and made culturally relevant to enable all students to acquire the skills they need to flourish, live a healthy life, have a range of options, take part in, integrate into, and contribute to society, and become successful workers, parents and citizens.

For online resources as well as the research references that inform this issue, please visit:
www.cea-ace.ca/facts-on-education

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