



Creating Equitable Access to Education: A Comparative Analysis of North America & Northern Europe

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Abstract

Education is one of the most significant building blocks in society, so much so that the United Nations has identified quality education as one of the key building blocks for sustainable development, stating that it enables upward socioeconomic mobility and aids global and local development (United Nations, 2020). Every year there are various studies done on education with the aim of creating more equitable access to education. Though research effort is shown when it comes to trying to improve equity in education, many countries still fall short and lack equitable access to education which impacts overall development. Recently Northern European countries such as Finland, Norway, and Denmark have skyrocketed on the World Economic Forums Advanced Economies Educational Equity list some even surpassing North American countries like Canada that have long held top ten positions on this list. This paper will use a comparative sociological approach to conduct a comparative analysis of education in northern Europe and North America, this research method offers a unique perspective that shines a light on areas where improvement is necessary. The objective of this research is to identify areas of improvement and offer suggestions on how countries can create more equitable access to education with the goal of long-term societal development.

Subject Areas

Educational Technology

Keywords

Equity, Education, Development, Accessibility, Comparative

1. Introduction

Education is one of the most important aspects of society and can be the root of a country's ability to develop sustainably. "Education is an essential human virtue, a necessity of society, basis of good life and sign of freedom". It is an absolute "must" (Bhardwaj, 2016) [1]. Unfortunately, on a global scale, there seems to be many disparities when it comes to accessing education. With time we as a society have slowly but surely moved from the idea and importance of "equality" to that of "equity." This means that we're moving away from this idea of sameness to the idea of impartiality because sameness is null and void in a world where everyone is different. As a society and as a country there are various goals that we must attain in order to develop sustainability and many of these goals are rooted in equity. The United Nations has put forth various focus areas with the goal of sustainable development, and one of the top areas of focus is "Quality Education". Which seeks to attain equitable solutions and universal access to education as education enables upward socioeconomic mobility and aids global and local development (United Nations, 2020) [2]. This being said it is clear that creating equitable access to education is a significant global issue that can have so many present and future impacts. This paper will aim to provide an answer to the question of how equitable access to education can be attained globally and locally. This research question will be answered through a comparative analysis of North American education and Northern European education.

1.1. Literature Review

There has been a significant amount of research conducted on both North American and Northern European education, but little to no comparative research on the two. In order to fully grasp my topic and ensure that my paper has the strongest information possible included, I've conducted a literature review of the topic to see what research has already been conducted on equity education in both North America and Northern Europe. There is a substantial amount of research that has been conducted on both these areas and in order to answer the question of how equitable access to education can be attained globally and locally, I am going to be comparing past research on equity education in North America and Northern Europe. It is relevant to this paper to examine research done regarding both areas; this literature review will do just that.

Most prior research has been conducted in separate areas focusing on how accessible education is to specify. The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development highlights some key aspects of designing an equitable education system and this is a key piece of literature that we will refer to throughout the paper (Field, Kuczera, & Pont, 2019) [3]. It focuses on education design, practices & resourcing. Research in the field of education design is plentiful when it comes to creating equitable and accessible learning environments from designing collaborative knowledge-building environments (So, Seih, & Toh-Heng, 2010) [4], to using ICT to create equitable and accessible learning for those at a

systemic disadvantage (Whitney, Keith, Bühler, Hewer, Lhotska, Miesenberger, Sandnes, Stephanidis, & Velasco, 2011) [5]. Literature on educational practices is also quite prominent in both North America and Northern Europe. From the literature on social inclusion and equity practices in European schools (Galindo & Rodríguez, 2015) [6] to literature on integrating equity into North American education (Ng, 2003) [7]. Finally, literature on educational resources for equitable and accessible education is quite prevalent. From the analysis of financial resources in education (Fernandez & Rogerson, 2003) [8] to the digital resources (Buczynski, 2007) [9], and even a look at the globalization of education (Willems & Bossu, 2012) [10]. Overall, there are enumerated amounts of scholarly literature that will aid me in conducting the research needed to answer my thesis of “how equitable access to education can be attained globally and locally” through a comparative analysis of North America and Northern Europe.

1.2. Theoretical Framework: Comparative Sociology Approach

The purpose of this paper is to provide a comparative analysis of North American education and Northern European education with the purpose of answering the question of how equitable access to education can be attained globally and locally. Attainment of accessible education for all is predominately an equity issue, so this is something that is important to keep in mind when developing a theoretical framework. The approach that I think will be best suited to answering the proposed research question is a comparative sociology framework. A comparative sociology approach involves going “beyond purely descriptive accounts into the realms of analysis and explanation, when conducting a sociological approach or using a sociological framework, often involved is making comparisons, since it is only through comparisons that the particular characteristics of different social situations and relationships can be distinguished from their more general, universal features” (Crow, 1997) [11]. Essentially, a sociological approach involved making comparisons between various countries or places. Often times, it is pre-assumed that a sociological framework is solely dependent on comparing social classes, fortunately, this is not the case, and a sociological comparative framework can also involve comparing aspects of society such as cultures and values. In the case of education, when we look at education from a comparative perspective, it is quite evident that particular region’s sociology and sociological impacts are reflected in said region’s educational environments through educational policy, setup, values, curriculum, pedagogies and more. This is why I’ve chosen to analyse the question of how equitable access to education can be attained globally and locally by following the sociological comparison framework when comparing both North American education and Northern European education. The hope of using this framework is to support my comparative analysis of educational resources, educational practice and educational design in Northern Europe and North America. Sociological practices and social life in and of themselves vary significantly when looking at Northern European countries in com-

parison to North American ones. It is common for different geographical areas to share varying sociological values and it can be quite common for these values to trickle down into different aspects of society such as economy, education, workforce and more. This reflection of a particular geographical area's sociology in their education setup and practices is what this paper will further analyze in order to answer the research question of how equitable access to education can be attained globally and locally. Throughout this paper, the comparative sociology framework will be used to take a deeper dive into the sociology of both countries in Northern Europe as well as countries in North America. The hope is that the outcome of this analysis will shine a light on sociological dilemmas that have an impact on education and how these issues can be combated in order to make education more accessible and equitable on both a global and local level.

2. Equity Education in North America

North America has long been thought of as an equity leader, especially when it comes to equity in education. Canada in specific has spent consecutive years in the top 10 of the World Economic Forums Advanced Economies Educational Equity lists. However, in the last few years, Finland has surpassed Canada on the list and Norway and the Netherlands are not far behind (World Economic Forum, 2019) [12]. Equity in education can benefit society greatly which is why it's so crucial to research the topic. There is a direct pipeline between education and societal development, often times governments put a lot of focus on education for this exact reason. Equitable access to education can lead to economic development, societal development, and overall sustainability this is due to the direct link between education and its impact on society's sustainable development (Hegarty, 2008) [13] which this paper will explore. Conducting a comparative analysis on the topic will highlight the equity disparities in North American education and offer insight into how the education system can be improved from an equity standpoint. Identifying areas in educational design, practice and resourcing that are falling short and could benefit from improvements is only the starting point. Using a sociological approach to analyse and suggest methods for improving these identified areas is a primary objective of this comparative analysis. Comparing literature and existing knowledge on the topic of equity education in North America will allow for a sociological approach to take place and for these improvements to be suggested. Overall, this research not only benefits the field of education but society as an entirety, and it will for years to come.

3. Educational Design

In order to see how equitable and accessible education can be achieved on a global and local level it is first crucial to examine educational design. Educational design is an umbrella term that is concerned with the design of not only education as an entirety but pedagogical design, curriculum design and learning process design. Educational design aims to solve problems commonly associated

with education by designing and education system that overcomes these issues. Designing an equitable and accessible curriculum and learning experience is the first step to ensuring that equitable access to education is achieved at both the global and local levels. The first aspect of this sociological comparative approach will be to look at educational design by comparing two geographical areas with varying educational design elements, by doing so we will be able to see what areas can be improved for all around success.

3.1. Design for Equity Education in North America

Curriculum design and development is at the root of designing equity education in North America. In order to properly compare North American curriculum with Northern European curriculum this section will focus on the Ontario curriculum put in place by the Ministry of Education. The Ontario curriculum focuses on two main aspects Transferrable skills like digital literacy, global citizenship, communication, critical thinking and more. The second aspect is cross curricular and integrated learning, which includes things like social/emotional skills, environmental skills, stem skills and financial literacy (Government of Ontario, 2020) [14]. This design allows for accessible and equitable education, but there are some limitations which have led to Canada falling short of their usual top spot as leaders in equity education. Though the curriculums around north America do aim to be equitable and accessible the design of these curriculums needs to change to make rooms for accessibility and equity. Some examples on where the curriculum could change to be more accessible would be in regard to multiliteracies, curriculum in North America, Canada in specific does not reflect the countries diversity. “The absence of serious policy consideration to address linguistic diversity at all levels of the educational system has resulted in the ‘normalization’ of some highly problematic assumptions and practices that risk compromising Canadian schools’ commitment to equity” (Cummins, 2006) [15]. This being said, curriculum design does not only limit multiliteracy, but it also disadvantages those at a social disadvantage such as First Nations, people of colour and people with disabilities.

First Nations students are often disadvantaged by the lack of Indigenous cultural knowledge and perspectives in the school curriculum leading to failure amongst Indigenous students (Cajete, 1994 [16]; Deloria & Wildcat, 2001 [17]; Kirkness, 1998 [18]). We see this educational design reflected in poverty rates amongst First Nations communities, suicide rates in these communities, high levels of alcohol and opioid use and more (Agbo, 2002) [19]. The curriculum also tends not to address the needs of these students at a disadvantage (O’Connor, 2017) [20]. North American curriculums don’t have very empathetic undertones, they are often academic focused and tend not to take into consideration life outside of the classroom. This kind of educational design leads to systemic disadvantages. This can also be seen when looking at students who have a disability and are often singled out and unincluded due to their inability to participate in the task at hand. In order to combat this, student-centred learning and a

more individual approach is needed to ensure accessible and equitable education and in order for this to occur there must be a change in education design, specifically the design of curriculums that are outdated and lack innovation that leads to students being disadvantaged (Morales-Mann & Kaitell, 2001) [21].

3.2. Design for Equity Education in Northern Europe

In comparison, curriculum design in Northern Europe has begun to make these changes that North American schools have not and are significantly lacking. The focus of curriculums in northern Europe is to “genuinely take into account the needs of students faced with the demands of the modern world; to conform to the accepted and logical principles of curriculum design; to be relevant, coherent, comprehensive, and allow breadth of study for all students in the system; to guarantee in the last two year, a general education around the eight key competences for lifelong learning; and to impact favourably on specific groups, such as students without a language section, students with special educational needs, students with more than one national language and small language sections; then, existing subject boundaries need to be reduced and subject integration and networked approaches to curriculum need to be adopted” (Gray, Scott, & Mehisto, 2020) [22]. Finland in particular has created a curriculum that is sweeping Northern Europe and aims to reform education with the goal of working against negative trends in education as well as meeting the challenges of the rapidly changing world and the unknown future. This form of education is slowly but surely spreading across Northern Europe and is changing the face of education design because it allows educational design to reflect societal changes and become more modernized. Modernizing education and making education more inclusive and mindful is crucial with the changing times. Finland has also set the stage for equity in education via their “education for all” approach to education. The Finnish “Education for All” approach has been developing during the decades since the first Compulsory Education Act 1921, and practically every student is served in the same comprehensive school system. It is reasonable to state that the Finnish basic education system has achieved an appropriate level of inclusion: practically everybody enrolls in the same system and the principle of being able to attend a neighborhood school also applies to students with disabilities (Honkasilta, Ahtiainen, Hienonen, & Jahnukainen, 2019) [23]. This approach to education and the impact it has had is what has allowed Northern European countries to rise the ranks of equity education and become one of the most accessible countries from an academic standpoint. This Education design has allowed Northern to be a prime example to countries around the world when it comes to creating equitable and accessible education on a global and local level.

3.3. Comparative Analyses

When looking at educational design in North America and Northern Europe from a sociological comparative aspect, it is quite easy to see why Northern Eu-

European countries have recently been quickly surpassing North American countries as far as education and educational development is concerned. A lot of this has to do with educational design and how each geographical area's educational design reflects its society, societal values, and societal dilemmas. It is clear that North American countries take on a far more academic approach to educational design, where little to no aspects of the area's sociology is taken into account when designing curriculums and conducting general education design. This varies from Northern Europe which has recently made great strides to modernizing education design and education as an entirety. They have made steps to ensure that all students have access to good quality education which has aided them in creating equitable and accessible education on a local level and inspiring equitable and accessible education on a global level.

4. Educational Practices

The next key element of determining how equitable and accessible education can be achieved on a global and local level is examining educational practices and their impact on overall learning. Educational practice is an overarching term that covers so many different areas of teaching. It covers everything from teaching practices to assessment practices and even metacognitive practices and strategies. Educational practices can have a significant impact on equity and accessibility in education, this impact can be seen when comparing North American educational practices with the educational practices present in Northern Europe.

4.1. North American Educational Practices

There are many educational practices that aim to create accessible and equitable school settings in North America. Ontario implements the “equity and excellence” practice into their schoolboards which aims to promote an inclusive education system through legislation, policy, and action with hopes of a culture of continuous improvement in terms of equity in schools (Government of Canada, 2009) [24]. British Columbia aims to provide “inclusive and responsive learning environments that recognize the value of diversity and provide equity of access, opportunity and outcome for all students including students with disabilities and diverse abilities” (Government of British Columbia, 2020) [25]. They facilitate this through educational program and policy practice. Despite having equitable educational programs and policy, North American schools often practice very rigid schedules, rules, and codes. A prime example of this being dress codes which often put stringent restrictions on clothing that often predominately impact female students, students of religious & cultural minorities and students who may face family financial struggles outside of school. Dress codes often reproduce race, class, and gender inequality through the regulation of students' bodies and when looking at the situation through an ethnographic lens it is clear that students of a minority are disproportionately impacted by school policy like

this, which juxtaposes the North American educational practice of promoting equity through policy. another example of this is the strict time schedules often present in North American schools, specifically in Canadian public schools which tend to have strict rules and schedules that are “Seemingly innocuous on the surface, these school rules, proxies for indoctrinating compliance and acquiescence to social order and state rule, likewise extended to areas such as compulsory daily attendance, the rigidity of classroom routines and rituals, the necessity for timely memorization of curricular information, and the division of the school day into discreet blocks of time. All of these are mirrors of broader social, military, religious and industrial values that would have held sway throughout history and arguably still do today” (Saul, 2020) [26]. Schedules like these and putting the value on time often does the exact opposite of what equity policy encourages. Many students, specifically students who are minorities and already face the negative impacts of inequity in society are often the ones who struggle with stringent rules and schedules. This kind of educational practice is what has made North American educational policy ineffective and lead to them falling short when looking at educational equity on a global scale. Unfortunately, despite many North American countries, states and provinces having these educational practices in place, North America often falls short of its Northern European counterparts when it comes to closing the education gap and providing accessible and equitable education.

4.2. Northern European Educational Practices

Northern European countries have implemented practices that have launched them to the top of the world’s educational leaders, especially in terms of educational equity and accessibility. This stems from the practices that many Northern European countries implemented rather than just putting forth ideals and defining what equity “should” look like. Policy and practice in Northern European countries like Finland, Sweden and Denmark have taken away the pressures that can impact students who are already at a disadvantage; they have made basic needs a top priority, and taken an individualized approach to education which has created not only accessible but equitable education. Majority of countries in Northern Europe, Denmark in particular, avoid ranking and standardized assessment which promotes equity in schools (Virtanen, Moreira, Ulvseth, Andersson, Tetler, & Kuorelahti, 2018) [27]. The presence of standardized testing tends to misplace students who are at a societal disadvantage and is not an equitable approach to assessment which is why the Northern European approach is far more beneficial from an equity standpoint. Northern European countries also tend to put the basics, an example of this would be Finland providing free healthcare, meals, counselling, and guidance to students to balance social inequity and improve accessibility. (Halinen & Järvinen, 2008) [28]. The Finnish education practices are rooted in the idea that societal changes have a direct effect on education in many ways. “While people are moving from the countryside to towns and na-

tionally the number of children is falling off, it will be big economical and pedagogical question to maintain the sufficient net of schools and quality of education and welfare services in the future. Nowadays schools must carry a larger responsibility of pupil's well-balanced development, welfare, and health. The work at school is getting more demanding every day. The National Core Curriculum for basic education emphasizes the wide task of schools. We are developing the tools to fulfil the challenge" (UNESCO, 2007) [29]. This approach of meeting children's welfare needs as an aspect of educational practice is what makes Northern European educational practice so progressive. Finally, Northern European countries take an individualized approach to learning, for example Sweden's individualized learning model and the practices that are incorporated within it (Giota, Bergh, & Emanuelsson, 2019) [30]. Overall, Northern European educational practices are a major reason why they are rising the ranks of education and becoming global leaders when it comes to accessible and equitable education.

4.3. Comparative Analyses

When analyzing educational practice in North America and how it compares to that of Northern European educational practice, the disparities are clear. North America, Canada in specific as the examples reflect, have the policy and programs in place to aim for equity through educational practice. Unfortunately, this is often outshined by stringent codes and regulations within schools and for students that often make it hard for equity to thrive and can further the negative impacts of social inequities in the educational setting. Ultimately, the policy is there, but the practice is lacking. On the other hand, Northern Europe has made clear strides in their educational practice to combat societal inequities and the impacts they may have on students by ensuring student welfare and eliminating standardized testing that often ranks students and opting for a more individualized approach to assessment. This contrast in educational practice makes it clear why Northern Europe is slowly but surely surpassing North America from an equity education standpoint, it also shows the importance of incorporating equity into educational practice rather than just educational policy.

5. Educational Resourcing

The final element of determining how equitable and accessible education can be achieved on a global and local level is by analysing the resources that a particular area has and what portion of said resources they allocate to education.

5.1. Educational Resourcing in North America

North America is filled with resource-rich countries, provinces, and states. The question of how these resources are allocated for education is crucial in understanding their equitable and accessible education. For example, around North America there seems to be funding disparities in areas with large populations of

socially disadvantaged individuals. In Canada funding disparities severely impacts some of the most disadvantaged individuals, our First Nations communities. The funding gap between First Nations schools and other schools across Canada averages around 30 percent (Gallagher-Mackay, Kidder, Methot, & Strachan, 2013) [31]. Canada is a country that prides itself for being multi-cultural, valuing diversity, and having educational outcomes that have been identified as excellent and equitable with above average performance and lower than average impact of socio-economic status and immigrant status in PISA. The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, plus policies concerning childcare, language rights, immigration, and Indigenous people have affected equity in a positive manner. However, there are long-standing and emerging inequities, particularly for Indigenous people in regard to education (Campbell, 2020) [32]. Throughout Canadian history from the traumatic history of residential schooling to the low quality and minimally funded education present in First Nations communities today, educational resourcing disparities are extremely clear in North America.

This is unacceptable and occurs across North America and for numerous disadvantaged groups outside of the First Nations. It is one of the main reasons why North America is falling short of leadership status from an equity standpoint

5.2. Educational Resourcing in Northern Europe

Northern Europe is a strong contrast to this due to their equitable approach to resource providing. As previously stated they provide enumerate resources in their schools from free lunches to free counselling and even free guidance. This is due to their funding and how equitable its resource allocation is. There are multiple things put in place to ensure equitable funding throughout countries like Norway, Denmark, Sweden, and Finland. A prime example of this is Norway's resource allocation. The Norwegian education budget is equal to 6.8 per cent of the gross domestic product. The average for OECD countries is 4.9 per cent (OECD). In 1999, expenditure per pupil in Norwegian primary schools was 43 per cent above the OECD average (measured according to spending power), 42 per cent above average in lower secondary schools and 32 per cent above average in upper secondary schools. The principal reason for the high costs is that there are more teachers per pupils in Norway than in other OECD countries (Opheim, 2004) [33]. This resource allocation benefits Norwegians, the indigenous population of Norway, and immigrants alike. There are minimal funding disparities in Norwegian education leading to benefits for all. Due to this funding and lack of disparity in funding, schools in these regions can provide educational resources better than most, which is yet another reason why they have risen the ranks of education from an equity and accessibility standpoint.

5.3. Comparative Analyses

When looking at educational resourcing in North America and Northern Europe from a sociological comparative aspect, it is quite easy to see why Northern

European countries have recently been surpassing North American countries as far as education and educational equity are concerned. North American countries have clear resourcing disparities and minimal equity when it comes to resource allocation, which leads to further disadvantages for minority communities like the First Nations. Northern European countries on the other hand allocate their educational funding and resources equitably to Norwegians, immigrants, and indigenous people alike.

6. Concluding Statement

6.1. Research Outcomes

The main goal of this paper was to provide research outcomes by answering the question of how equitable education and equitable access to education can be attained globally and locally. This was accomplished by providing an in-depth comparative analysis of North American and Northern European education. Throughout the paper, sociological data have been compared using a comparative sociological approach regarding educational design, educational practices, and educational resources to show how North American countries can improve their education systems using the ideas of their innovative, rising-star counterparts in Northern Europe. It is clear that where educational design is a concern, North America can work to consider a certain area's sociological positioning when conducting educational design. This will have a more equitable outcome than the current model where education design is very general and concerned solely with academic achievement disregarding the sociology behind the achievers. In regard to educational practice, North America can aim for educational equity by focusing on putting their educational policies into practice and combating harmful and stringent regulations in education that don't benefit students, similar to their Northern European counterparts. Finally, where educational resources are concerned, North America can benefit from following after their Northern European counterparts and moving toward a more equitable approach to educational resources and funding allocation. Overall, through a comparative analysis using a sociological theoretical framework, it is clear that North American education systems can benefit from following Northern European example, and that if the focus is put on improving educational design, educational practices, and educational resources, equitable education can be attained at not only the local level, but also the global level.

6.2. Final Considerations

High-quality education is a crucial aspect of creating a well-developed society, it is something that everyone should have access to on both a global and local level. UNESCO describes this well by stating that "An equitable, inclusive education system is fundamental to achieving these priorities, and is recognized internationally as critical to delivering a high-quality education for all learners" (UNESCO, 2008) [34]. I hope that this research paper has provided significant clarity on

creating an accessible and equitable education system across the globe at both global and local levels.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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