# A Systematic Review: Issues on Equity in Education

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## Abstract

Equity in education is a measure of education achievement such that every individual student is given fair treatment and opportunity to be successful. Every student is entitled to equitable education but there are many challenges associated with the successful implementation of this ideal at the ground level such as racial discrimination, financial problems, gender inequality and gap in digital competence. In this paper, systematic review is used to analyze previous studies done on equity in education. The Prisma protocol and McDermott Model were used to filter the findings. The results of this study identified four major issues of equity in education, namely health equity: equipping educators to take action, building relationships for student success, promoting a safe and welcoming environment for immigrant students; and equitable access to higher education. Each of these issues has a crucial influence on equity in education.

## Keywords

Fairly, Equally, Social Justice, Equality of Treatment, Equity in Education, Sameness, Equivalence

## 1. Introduction

According to Luke, Woods & Weir (2013), civil rights, feminism and post-colonial education have influenced the definition of equity in education. Equity means that students should have equal opportunities to achieve their optimal abilities without being restricted by their community background or dispositional characteristics' (Luke, Woods, & Weir, 2013). According to Majzub (2013), equity in education means that students with special needs such as students with Down's syndrome, mental retardation, autistic students and slow learners should be well integrated into the school. Nancy Fraser's three criteria of justice, namely

redistribution, recognition and representation are also useful in evaluating equitable educational opportunities (Luke, Woods, & Weir, 2013; Gewirtz, 1998; Lingard, Hayes, Mills, & Christie, 2003). When it comes to the technical aspects of the education curriculum, the performance of the students and the knowledge and values acquired should be considered as well (Luke, Woods, & Weir, 2013).

## 2. Research Objective and Purpose

To review previous studies on equity in education within 2009 to 2019 from different points of view.

## 3. Research Question

The research questions are therefore focused on:

1) What are the issues related to equity in education from different points of view?

2) Why is promoting equity in education important?

## 4. Methodology

During the selection process of the review article, two steps are used first is the PRISMA protocol (Moher, Shamseer, Clarke, Ghersi, Liberati, Petticrew, Shekelle, & Stewart, 2015) and followed by the McDermott model (2004) (McDermott, Graham, & Hamilton, 2004) to ensure the articles selected can explore the issues on equity in education from different points of view.

### 4.1. PRISMA Protocol

Systematic reviews and meta-analyses are important to summarize evidence accurately and reliably. In clinical trials, systematic reviews and meta-analysis has been widely used to compound the problem of reducing waste in research. Hence, the PRISMA protocol comes in to reduce waste of effort in completing this systematic review, especially when dealing with duplication of articles. According to (Shamseer, Moher, Clarke, Ghersi, Liberati, Petticrew et al., 2015), there are four steps in the PRISMA protocol, namely identification, screening, eligibility and included.

### 4.1.1. Identification

During the search process, the Scopus, Wiley and Google scholar databases are used at the identification stage. Citavi 6 is used in searching a group of related articles within a short period. The keywords used are: definition of equity in education, elements of equity, and issues for equity in education. This method helps to create inclusive and exclusive criteria for obtaining the data that really fulfils the objectives of the study. The criteria used are:

1) Use of the symbol "+, −", AND, NOT EQUITY cell,

2) Limit the search year, searches are only based from 2010 to 2019,

3) Whether from journals, theses, proceedings or reports, search sources are

different,

    4) Use articles references to track other appropriate articles.

### 4.1.2. Screening

During the initial screening, about 350 articles related to "equity in education" were found. Then, the articles found of this study are then filtered based on:

    1) Definitions of equity in education articles,

    2) Elements and issues related to equity in education,

    5) Importance of equity in education.

### 4.1.3. Eligibility and Included

Eligible data collection uses a variety of sources of data. Thus, articles from newspapers, theses, lecture papers, seminars, descriptive reports and technical reports were obtained. With the usage of systematic review, only qualitative research articles are included and analyzed. The total items obtained from the PRISMA protocols under eligibility phase are approximately 118. The selection process using the PRISMA protocol is shown in Figure 1.

PRISMA 2009 Flow Diagram
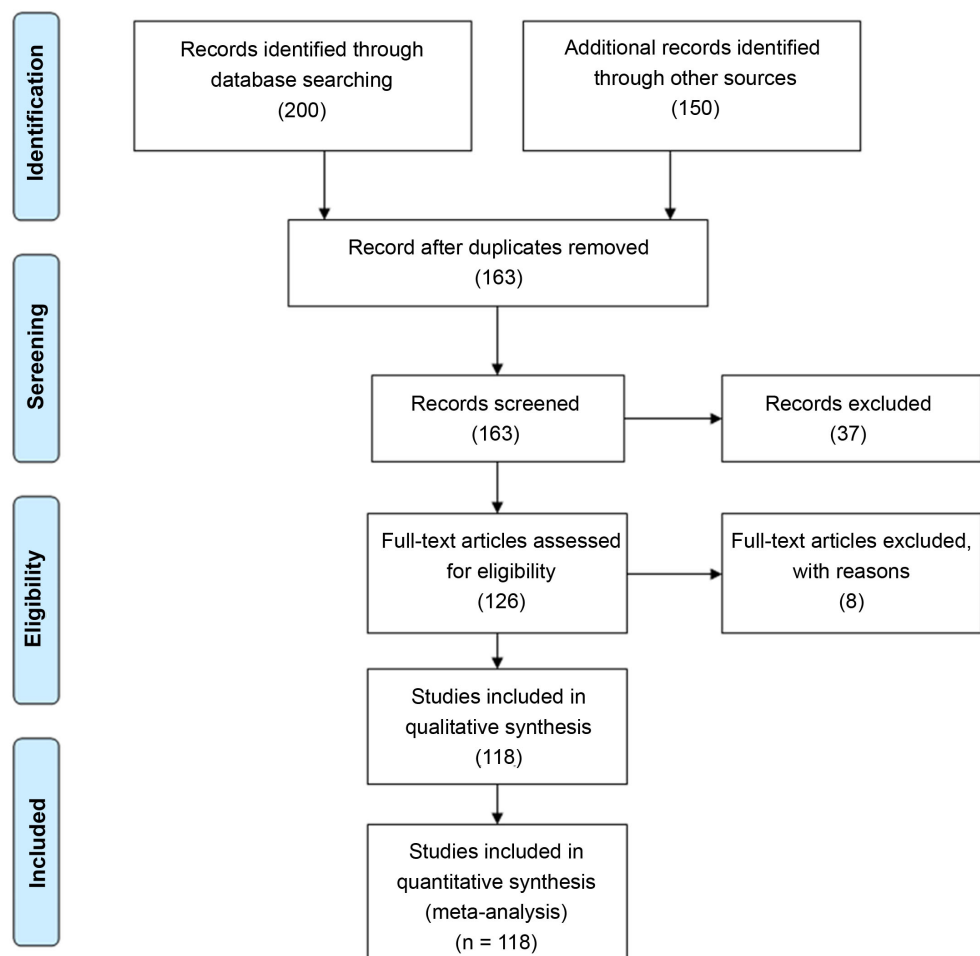


Figure 1. Data collection using PRISMA protocol.

## 4.2. McDermott

The research article selected from the PRISMA protocol is filtered again using the McDermott Model (McDermott, Graham, & Hamilton, 2004). In this model, the quality of the selected articles is graded based on several assessment criteria. The criteria for quality assessment are outlined in Table 1. This is done to ensure that the selected articles are of high quality.

Articles that exceed the evaluation quality are also graded. Each article is graded whether A, B, C, or D. Grading articles are made as follows:

| Grading of the article | Description |
| --- | --- |
| A | Fulfils all six criteria |
| B | Fulfils five criteria |
| C | Fulfils four criteria |
| D | Fulfils three criteria |

After the second filtering process, 13 articles were selected. These articles fulfil the minimum quality assessment criteria for this study. The quality assessment of these articles based on the McDermott Model is shown in Table 2.

### Coding

The selected articles will be theme-based coded using a combination of alphabets and numbers. The letter "E" represents an element and the letter "I" represents an issue whereas numbers will be used to indicate each criterion involved. This representation is used to facilitate data analysis and present the findings more systematically.

## 5. Findings

Equity in education is a global issue. There are many publications on this topic

Table 1. Quality assessment of articles by McDermott et al. (2004) (McDermott, Graham, & Hamilton, 2004).

| No | Element | Descriptions |
| --- | --- | --- |
| 1 | Goals and objectives | Does the article clearly state the goals and objective? |
| 2 | Study context | Does the article explain clearly how the study involved planning, implementation and development was conducted? |
| 3 | Sample | Does the article provide a sufficient sample of research? |
| 4 | Methodology | Does the article provide a research methodology description that includes frameworks for the study, data collection, and data analysis? |
| 5 | Data | Is support such as schedule, interview/focus and feedback from observations included? Is the information being clearly translated and analyzed? |
| 6 | The results of the study are validated | Does the researcher verify the study's analysis by means of expert review, feedback or other mechanisms? |

Table 2. Quality assessment of the selected articles based on grading A, B, C and D of the McDermott model.

| Researcher | Year | Journal Quartile | Criteria | | | | | | Grade |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | Goals and objectives | Study context | Sample | Methodology | Data | The results of the study are validated | |
| Radford (2013) | 2013 | - | / | / | | / | | / | C |
| Cookson Jr. (2017) | 2017 | - | / | / | / | / | / | / | A |
| Hughes (2017) | 2017 | - | / | / | / | / | / | / | A |
| Carnevale, Jayasundera, & Gulish (2016) | 2016 | - | / | / | / | / | / | / | A |
| Kann et al. (2016) | 2016 | - | / | / | / | / | / | / | A |
| Ma, Pender, & Welch (2016) | 2016 | - | / | / | / | / | / | / | A |
| Hood (2018) | 2018 | - | / | / | / | / | / | / | A |
| Quiroga (2017) | 2017 | - | / | / | / | / | / | / | A |
| Holzer & Baum (2017) | 2017 | - | / | / | / | / | / | / | A |
| Brittain, Willis, & Cookson Jr. (2019) | 2017 | - | / | / | / | / | / | / | A |
| Schlanger (2018) | 2018 | - | / | / | / | / | / | / | A |
| Roehlkepartian & Pekel et al. (2017) | 2017 | - | / | / | / | / | / | / | A |
| Glymph & Walker (2018) | 2018 | - | / | / | / | / | / | / | A |

by researchers from 2010 until 2019. However, our study will only be focusing on four key elements of equity namely health equity (E1), relationships build up equity (E2), environment equity (E3), and access to higher education equity (E4). For each element of equity, the corresponding issue is identified. The year of publication and the number of reported issues is also recorded. The results are presented in the following tables and graphs (Table 3).

The detailed explanation is as follows:

### 1) Elements

The four elements which are closely related with equity in education are health equity, relationships build up equity, environment equity and access to higher education equity. Table 4 shows the number of reports and percentage of each element.

### 2) Issues

There are four issues identified through this study review, namely health equity: equipping educators to action (I1), building relationships for student success (I2), promoting a safe and welcoming environment for immigrant students (I3), and equitable access to higher education (I4).

### a) Health Equity: Equipping Educators to Take Action

According to (Glymph & Walker, 2018), achieving health equity for all students is to ensure the fairness at leading productive and healthy lives. To achieve this, educators should be aware and equipped with the knowledge and

**Table 3.** Summary of include empirical article.

| Researcher | Year | Participant | Journal Title/Quartile | Type of research | Elements (E) | | | | Issues (I) | | | | Findings |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | | E1 | E2 | E3 | E4 | I1 | I2 | I3 | I4 | |
| Radford (2013) | 2013 | | "No Point in Applying": Why Poor Students Are Missing at Top Colleges | Reports - Descriptive | | | | / | | | | / | -some low income students avoid the application to the best colleges |
| Cookson Jr. (2017) | 2017 | | EXPLORING EQUITY ISSUES: Building Relationships for Student Success | Reports - Descriptive | | / | | | | / | | | -positive relationships are important to develop the innate talents and abilities of educators and students |
| Hughes (2017) | 2017 | | Exploring Equity Issues: Equitable Access to Higher Education | Reports - Descriptive | | | | / | | | | / | -students coming from low-income or under-represented background tend to attend under-resourced institutions, such as community colleges, and less prestigious four-year colleges, with low rates of completion |
| Carnevale, Jayasundera, & Gulish (2016) | 2016 | | America's Divided Recovery: College Haves and Have-Nots | Numerical/ Quantitative Data; Reports - Research | | | | / | | | | / | -when facing with challenge such as tough economic times, a college education is going to provide some useful protection to the individuals |
| Kann et al. (2016) | 2016 | | Sexual Identity, Sex of Sexual Contacts, and Health-Related Behaviors among Students in Grades 9-12--United States and Selected Sites, 2015. Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report. Surveillance Summaries. Volume 65, Number 9 | Numerical/ Quantitative Data; Reports - Research | / | | | | | / | | | -when the Students have been identified as lesbian, gay, or bisexual, they are seriously contemplated suicide at nearly three times the rate of their heterosexual peers |
| Ma, Pender, & Welch (2016) | 2016 | | Education Pays 2016: The Benefits of Higher Education for Individuals and Society. Trends in Higher Education Series | Reports - Evaluative; Numerical/ Quantitative Data | | | | / | | | | / | -individuals with college degrees are having greater opportunities in employments and achieving higher living status, compared to those with only high school diploma |
| Hood (2018) | 2018 | | Exploring Equity Issues: Bio-Social-Emotional Needs of Immigrant Students, with a Focus on Central Americans | Reports - Descriptive | | | / | | | | / | | -after one young student's father dropped her off at school, she filmed her father to get arrested by ICE agents |

**Continued**

| | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Quiroga (2017) | 2017 | 25,000 teachers | Exploring Equity Issues: Promoting a Safe and Welcoming Environment for Immigrant Students | Reports - Descriptive | / | / | -derogatory language had been used against students of color, immigrants, Muslims, and other students based on sexual or gender orientation |
| Holzer & Baum (2017) | 2017 | | Making College Work: Pathways to Success for Disadvantaged Students | Education review | / | / | -The amount of pupils entering college from the lowest-income households has been increasing in a very positive way |
| Brittain, Willis, & Cookson Jr. (2019) | 2019 | | Sharing the Wealth: How Regional Finance and Desegregation Plans Can Enhance Educational Equity | School Finance Series | / | / | -The culture in school has far more influence on life and learning than other environmental factors including the school administration and education system |
| Schlanger (2018) | 2018 | | Exploring Equity Issues: Culturally Responsive Leaders | Reports - Descriptive | / | / | -negative incidents with worried about the show up of federal immigration agents at schools, have successfully stop lots of immigrant students from attending schools |
| Roehlkepartian & Pekel et al. (2017) | 2017 | | Relationships First: Creating Connections that Help Young People Thrive. | Reports - Descriptive | / | / | -social interactions help children to discover their inner selves |
| Glymph & Walker (2018) | 2018 | | Exploring Equity Issues: Health Equity--Equipping Educators to Take Action | Reports - Descriptive | / | / | -achieving health equity for all students is to ensure the fairness at leading productive and healthy lives |

**Table 4.** Number of articles based on elements.

| Elements | Number of articles | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| Health Equity | 3 | 23% |
| Relationships Build Up Equity | 3 | 23% |
| Environment Equity | 3 | 23% |
| Access to Higher Education Equity | 4 | 31% |

soft skills to help group which has been oppressed and marginalized due to their race, socioeconomic background or sexual orientation and gender identity. These groups of students might also be bullied in school. This discipline problem not only interrupts the teaching and learning process but it also causes stress

to the victims. Stress, emotional distress, and trauma pose serious consequences to young people's health and well-being. Bullying can develop into fights, which can lead to serious injury or even death (Mohamad Salleh & Zainal, 2014). Studies have shown that students that have been identified as lesbian, gay, or bisexual in school, are at risk of committing suicide at nearly three times the rate of their heterosexual peers (Kann, Olsen, McManus, Harris, Shanklin, Flint et al., 2016).

### b) Building Relationships for Student Success

For students to be successful in their studies, positive relationships among the educators and the students need to be built up constantly. A healthy and cooperative relationship between educators and students is pivotal to develop the innate abilities and talents of both groups (Cookson Jr., 2017). The National Scientific Council reported in 2004, "Relationships engage children in the human community in ways that help them define who they are, what they become, and how and why they are important to other people." With positive and strong relationships among educators and the students, the students will be able to complete their learning tasks confidently, without emotional barriers (Roehlkepartain, Pekel, Syvertsen, Sethi, Sullivan, & Scales, 2017). A student's motivation is one of the variables that can affect students' achievement level, as motivation can affect what, and how they learn (Yusoff, Mahamod, & Ghani, 2008). Hence, teachers must always give motivation to their students. Another important factor in building relationships for student success is the school culture. Great Schools Partnership defined the term "school culture" as beliefs, perceptions, relationships, attitudes, and written and unwritten rules that shape and influence every aspect of how a school functions (Brittain, Willis, & Cookson Jr., 2019; Cookson Jr., 2017). Every student is looking for the right environment to demonstrate his ability and skills (Salleh, Mahmud, & Amat, 2009). Therefore, the culture of the school has far more influence on the life and learning of a student than the education system, school administration, and even teachers and parents can ever have.

### c) Exploring Equity Issues: Promoting a Safe and Welcoming Environment for Immigrant Students

According to U.S. Immigrations & Customs Enforcement (ICE), there has been an increment in the levels of fear and anxiety among immigrant students. In a survey conducted for almost 25,000 teachers, 40% of students claim that derogatory language had been used against them because of their skin colour, immigrant status, Muslim religion or sexual and gender orientation. Immigrant arrests have increased by 38% since inauguration of the ICE (Quiroga, 2017). For example, there was an incident filmed by a young immigrant student showing her father getting arrested by ICE agents after dropping her off school (Hood, 2018). In another separate case, the agent helping to enrol an immigrant student to qualify for an immigrant benefit turned out to be a fraud (Schlanger, 2018). Such negative incidents discourage many immigrants from attending schools. Unfortunately, the school's environment and policies across the U.S. has also become unfriendly towards immigrant students although federal laws re-

quire that schools to enrol students without taking into account their immigration status, residency and social security numbers. Immigrant students face many challenges to get equitable education such as language barrier and cultural difference. Consequently, most immigrant students are reluctant on drawing attention to themselves and are embarrassment to talk about their family background or problems.

### d) Exploring Equity Issues: Equitable Access to Higher Education

According to Ma, Pender, & Welch (2016), higher education is very important not only to the individual, but also to the society, in providing intensive benefits to both (Ma, Pender, & Welch, 2016). For third world countries such as Malaysia, it is even more important to emphasize on higher education, especially science and technology education (Nasri, Yusof, Ramasamy, & Halim, 2010) to progress. For an individual, having a college degree means greater opportunities in employments and achieving higher living status, compared to those only graduating high school. Studies have shown that college-educated workers are least affected by the recession (Carnevale, Jayasundera, & Gulish, 2016), have of higher-level volunteerism and voting and have healthier lifestyle (Ma, Pender, & Welch, 2016). Inequities among the students still exist when it comes to access to higher education. Over the past twenty years, the gaps in higher education attainment by ethnicity and race are kept unchanged although more Americans are able to achieve higher levels of education (Ma, Pender, & Welch, 2016). For example, in 1995, 14% black, 10% Hispanics, and 28% white women with ages between 25 to 29 were able to get their bachelor's degree. In year 2015, the percentage was 24%, 18%, and 45% for blacks, Hispanics, and whites, showing an increase of percentage, but the disparities remained the same. Radford (2013) reported that most low-income students do not get into good colleges (Radford, 2013) because they are unaware of their college options and do not know the college admissions process. This might be due to inadequate information from their school guidance counsellors who are overburden with other matters. During the enrolment, students coming from low-income group tend to attend under-resourced institutions such as community colleges and they have low rates of completion (Hughes, 2017). Up to 40% of these students are absent when at the semester begins. Their reasons include the financial problems, loneliness and too much paperwork. As stated by Holzer and Baum (2017) and Ma, Pender, & Welch (2016), more effort must be taken to reduce these enrolment gaps (Ma, Pender, & Welch, 2016; Holzer & Baum, 2017).

### 3) Year of Report

The findings show that most reports are done between 2016-2017 and access to higher education equity is the key element for the implementation of equity in education, contributing 33% of the reported issues. Table 5 shows the year of the items is reported.
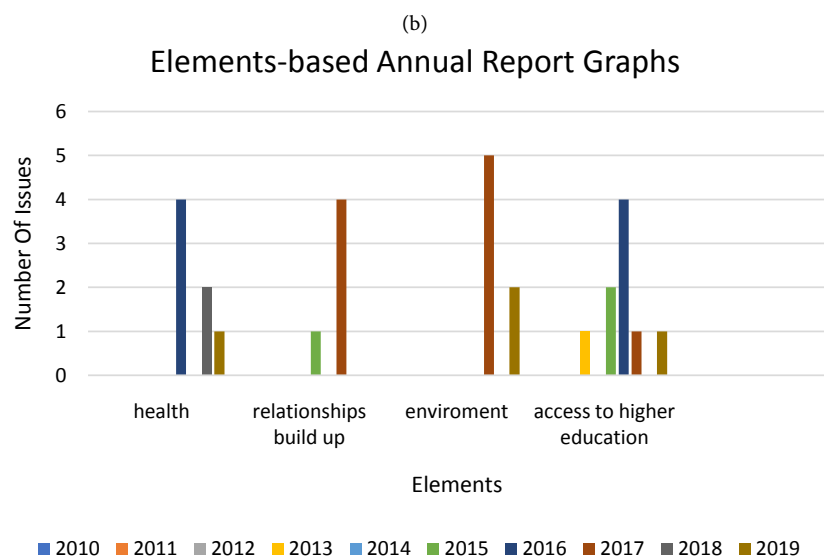
### 4) Researcher Reports

24 issues reported by 13 researchers in the integrated of equity in education from 2010 to 2019. Table 6 shows the number of reported problems.

**Table 5.** Year of reported issues based on elements.

(a)

| Elements | Year of report | | | | | | | | | | Total (%) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 2010 | 2011 | 2012 | 2013 | 2014 | 2015 | 2016 | 2017 | 2018 | 2019 | |
| health equity | | | | | | | 4 | | 2 | | 6 (25%) |
| relationships build up equity | | | | | | 1 | | 4 | | | 5 (21%) |
| environment equity | | | | | | | | 5 | | | 5 (21%) |
| access to higher education equity | | | | 1 | | 2 | 4 | 1 | | | 8 (33%) |
| Total | | | | 1 | | 3 | 8 | 10 | 2 | | 24 (100%) |

(b)

## Elements-based Annual Report Graphs



■2010 ■2011 ■2012 ■2013 ■2014 ■2015 ■2016 ■2017 ■2018 ■2019

**Table 6.** Number of reported issues based on researcher reports.

| Researchers | Number of reported issues |
|---|---|
| Radford, 2013 | 1 |
| Cookson Jr., 2017 | 2 |
| Hughes, 2017 | 1 |
| Carnevale, Jayasundera, & Gulish, 2016 | 2 |
| Kann et al., 2016 | 3 |
| Ma, Pender, & Welch, 2016 | 3 |
| Hood, 2018 | 1 |
| Quiroga, 2017 | 1 |
| Holzer & Baum, 2017 | 2 |
| Brittain, Willis, & Cookson Jr., 2019 | 2 |
| Schlanger, 2018 | 2 |
| Roehlkepartian & Pekel et al., 2017 | 2 |
| Glymph & Walker, 2018 | 2 |

## 6. Discussion and Conclusion

The result of this systematic review shows that there four key elements in defining the equity in education namely health equity, relationships build up equity, environment equity and access to higher education equity. To bridge the gap, lots of continued efforts are required. Our findings showed that access to higher education equity is the most significant issue. In conclusion, in a multicultural society, educators must learn to appreciate differences and cooperate to ensure that equitable education for every student. Educators also need to work hard to ensure that they can build healthy relationships and positive cultures in school so that every student can be successful regardless of their background.

## Acknowledgements

## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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