

## Conceptions of Equity

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According to initial analysis of data, six conceptions of equity seem to be held by school personnel. These six form "starting points" for data collection and analysis. It is likely that other conceptions will emerge or that some of the original six will be modified during the course of the research. The six conceptions of equity are labeled: equity as a concern for the whole child; equity as a safety net for individual differences; equity as the same treatment for everyone; equity as compensation for social injustice; equity as triage; and equity as the maximum return on a minimal investment. While the six conceptions of equity have roots in commonsense notions of fairness, there are strengths and weaknesses in each of them.

### *Equity as a Concern for the Whole Child*

The first conception of equity grows from a larger idea wherein education is viewed as concerned with the whole child. According to this perspective, each student is an individual who has unique and distinct educational, socio-emotional, and physical needs. In the research, most elementary teachers have expressed concerns about each of the children in the classrooms. They feel a deep sense of responsibility and hold themselves accountable for the children's welfare. These teachers are able to give detailed, often heart-wrenching, examples of the actions they take to help a child with academic, emotional, or physical needs.

### *Equity as a Safety Net for Individual Differences*

The conception of equity as a safety net recognizes that a single program cannot meet the educational needs of every student. Hence, teachers and other school personnel who hold this perspective create back-up programs, differentiated curricula, and other resources so that when one program does not work for a particular student, other options are available. Their notions about student and program mismatches often are couched in terms of psychological traits and include learning styles and ability.

### *Equity as the Same Treatment for Everyone*

The conception of equity as the same treatment for everyone seeks to ensure that all children are treated the same way. This view could be used to justify giving all students a common core curriculum, providing them with similar opportunities to succeed, and holding them to the same performance standards, including those for classroom and school behavior. The argument that everyone should be treated the same is based on the belief that there should be one set of standards for high performance in an area and that society at large demands performance or mastery that meets those standards. All students should be treated the same way so that they have an equal chance to meet the standards and an equal opportunity to succeed in the society at large.

*What concept of equity do you currently carry?*

*What do you see to be the benefits or drawbacks to each of the six conceptions?*

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<sup>1</sup>Secada, W. (1994). Equity and mathematics reform. NCRMSE Research Review: The Teaching and Learning of 3(3), 1-5. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin-Madison, Wisconsin Center for Educational Research Mathematics.

### *Equity as Compensation for Social Injustice*

The conception of equity as compensation for social injustice argues that specific groups of students, for instance a specific ethnic group or females, have not received fair treatment in the larger society or that the groups are not receiving a fair share of the school's resources. From this perspective, the school should actively redistribute resources to remedy the larger social or the more specific school-level inequities.

### *Equity as Triage*

According to the equity as triage conception, schools should divide students into three groups: those who are beyond help; those who, because of special skills or access to special resources, do not "really need the school, since they will make it anyway," and those for whom the school could provide input that could make a critical difference in whether a student will achieve success or failure in the future. Following the triage model, school resources would be invested in only the last group, those who fall along the middle of the distribution of the criteria being used, for example, college admission.

### *Equity as the Maximum Return on a Minimal Investment*

According to the maximum return on minimal investment notion of equity, schools and teachers should invest in the students who are most likely to benefit from their investment. Given the scarce resources available to schools and the stresses that schools, their staffs, and their students face every day, attention and resources should be focused on those students who are most likely to succeed. A school's teachers, for instance, would look for the students whom they view as worth educating. The students would be seen as those who "could be saved." From this perspective, additional resources would be provided to the students at the top of a school's distribution on some indicator of achievement.

### *Dealing with Multiple Notions of Equity*

It is possible for a person or for a school to hold what appear to be competing notions about equity. An individual teacher or a group of teachers may believe that, as far as standards for school discipline are concerned, students should be treated in the same way. Yet the same person or group may believe that the school should provide a range of academic and non-academic programs in order to address the educational aspirations of a diverse student body. Decision making becomes more complex when multiple notions of equity are applied to the same situation. A school may offer different mathematics courses in an effort to address student interests and abilities in a fair and equitable manner—equity as a safety net. Such an effort, if taken to an extreme, could result in an ever-increasing number of overlapping courses or the fragmentation of programs. If others in that school believe that the fairest way to educate students is to give them all the same core mathematics curriculum—equity as treating everyone the same—taken to this extreme, it could result in needless rigidity. Such a school would need to find ways to balance the interests of these groups. It would, for example, need to create courses around the same core curriculum, but provide students with options as to how they encounter the mathematical ideals and how they demonstrate that they understand what they have learned.