

# THE PEDAGOGY OF EQUITY



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## FOSTERING EQUAL OPPORTUNITY

*Providing all students, irrespective of their beliefs, racial background, culture, social milieu, sex, physical health or mental capacities, with a quality education that responds to a diversity of needs.*

At first glance, this quotation seems like it could have been written yesterday. In fact, it dates from 1964. It is a quotation of the foremost aim of college education as envisioned by the authors of the *Report of the Royal Commission of Inquiry on Education in the Province of Quebec* (p. 20, freely translated). Some 50 years ago, the democratization of education unquestionably brought about a diversification of the student population, with girls, Francophones, and students from disadvantaged backgrounds enrolling in the first level of the province's higher-education programs for the first time ever (Eckert, 2010). Since then, the diversity of students in colleges has continued to grow with respect to socio-economic, cultural and linguistic background, as well as characteristics such as neurology, gender, human spirit, and ability.

Yet despite this influx of diversity – ushered in by the hope of equal opportunity – social injustices and inequalities persist. According to Ratel and Pilote (2017), efforts to make higher education more accessible have not prevented mechanisms of systematic discrimination, especially targeting minority and marginalized groups in schools, from taking root. “Equal opportunity in education seems to be more theoretical than actual” (CSE, 2016, p. 72, freely translated).

But what exactly do we mean by “equal opportunity”? How does the principle fit in with justice and equity? What forms does equal opportunity take in the college system? This text sets out to briefly answer these questions, first, by exploring the nuances that distinguish the concepts of equality, equity and justice, and second, by presenting a few dimensions of equal opportunity, namely equality of access, learning, outcomes, and treatment. This context will lay the groundwork for a few potential approaches for teachers interested in promoting equal opportunity within the diverse student populations that make up their classes. The ideas presented here are inspired by the pedagogy of equity, a four-part approach aiming to, “replace silence with speech, omission with inclusion, passivity with active participation, and powerlessness with empowerment” (Solar, 2007, p.31, freely translated). These means are intended to enable all students, irrespective of background or needs, to feel valued and to have a quality experience during their college education, in turn facilitating their educational success.

equally. In contrast, equity is premised on distributive justice, which takes into account the value of each individual and their unequal merit (Billaudot, 2011 ; Saint-Arnaud, 1984). Briefly put, equality means treating everyone the same, whereas equity attempts to level the playing field by distributing according to needs. In the school context, equality is based on social justice, which holds that everyone should have access to the same free, quality education (Froese-Germain, 2014). In contrast, equity concerns academic justice, which considers student diversity (Monin & Morin, 2010). **Figure 1** illustrates the distinction between the concepts of equality and equity.

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### ▶ EQUALITY AND EQUITY

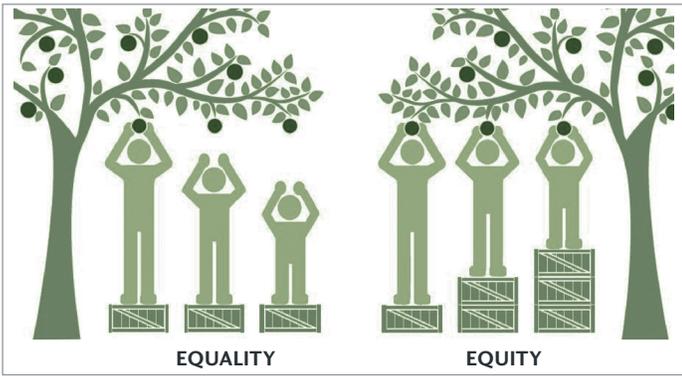
While both equality and equity seek to promote justice, be it social, academic, political, or economic (Clow, Hanson, & Bernier, 2012), they go about achieving justice in different ways. Equality comes under the principle of commutative justice, which disregards differences and treats each individual

### ▶ EQUAL OPPORTUNITY

Equality is a complex concept that is not defined in the absolute, “but always according to a situation where it takes on relative value: it is always a matter of the equality of some specific thing” (CSE, 2016, p. 8, freely translated). As such, it is important to determine what exactly should be made equal.



**FIGURE 1** DIFFERENCE BETWEEN EQUALITY AND EQUITY



Source: Saskatoon Health Region, 2014

It goes without saying that schools enable each youth to develop to their full potential, whatever it may be, by giving all students an equal opportunity to do so (CSE, 2016). Here, opportunity refers to the quality of a young person’s experience at school, which speaks to their relationship to learning and knowledge as well as their freedom to aspire to the same future opportunities as others. It is not necessarily measured by earning a diploma. Someone is said to realize their full potential when, regardless of the level of education completed, they,

“(have) experienced being valued at school, a sense of belonging, a positive relationship with learning, and (have) acquired the abilities and independence that enable him or her to actively take part in society” (CSE, 2016, p. 7 of the summary, freely translated).

A diversity of potential would therefore imply a diversity of opportunities. In turn, this requires that equal opportunity be promoted as an aim and an essential normative reference for the school system (Crahay, 2000).

The concept of equal opportunity in education is nevertheless somewhat fuzzy and difficult for all to agree on because of the many meanings given to the word opportunity (CSE, 2016). It can therefore be helpful to consider this ideal from the standpoint of different complementary facets, namely equal access, equal learning, equal outcome, and equal treatment (CSE, 2016 ; Demeuse & Baye, 2005 ; Grisay, 1984 ; Husén, 1975; Ross, 1983). The last of these – equal treatment – is similar to the concept of equity, which is the paradigm the college network is currently promoting in response to the diversity of students (Demeuse & Baye, 2005). The next section explores the four dimensions of equal opportunity, defining each and illustrating them with examples specific to the Quebec college system.

## Equal access

Equal access is when all individuals or groups of individuals, provided they meet the entrance requirements, have the same opportunities to access educational services within a public school system characterized by multiple education levels and fields of instruction. Equal access has been the basis of many demands for free education, which Dupriez and Verhoeven view as, “the mother of all academic equalities” (2006, p. 483, freely translated).

At the college level, one indicator of equal access is the development of a wide network of 48 CEGEPs across the province, providing students from all economic and geographical backgrounds with access to higher education (Dassylva, 2008). Yet full access has not been achieved; students in outlying regions are slightly disadvantaged since they have less extensive program offerings than in major urban centres, fewer spaces in some technical programs, and a greater distance to travel each day to attend their college classes (although they can choose to stay in their region) (CSE, 2016).

## Equal outcomes and equal learning

Equal outcomes generally refers to two things:

“...ensuring that all students leave the school system having developed their potential and a minimum common core of skills and knowledge to enable them to take their place in modern society...; [and] that all social groups are equitably represented among graduates at all education levels” (CSE, 2016, p. 49, freely translated).

This common core can be said to refer to equal learning, i.e., the educational principle that school must allow all young people to achieve the same basic learning (Crahay, 2000). In turn, this implies establishing a comparable education for all students (CSE, 2016). For colleges, the ministry devis that specify what competencies need to be developed in students, including goals and standards to meet, serve as one way to ensure equal learning across institutions. At the local level, program frameworks are born from the same idea of determining the essential learning for a given course, regardless of who is teaching it. The ‘core curriculum’ approach of offering the same set of courses to different student populations, irrespective of the discipline or program concentration, is also a good example of equal learning. To this end, general education includes a set of French, Philosophy, English, and Physical Education classes



that are mandatory for all students. This contributes to the development of competencies aligned with the aims of college education and promotes a common level of basic knowledge (MEES, 2017).

Equal outcomes can also be observed, more particularly in the realm of student learning, in the case of learning assessments focused on essential learning (Demeuse & Baye, 2005). For example, to earn their diploma of college studies, all students must pass their program's Program Comprehensive Assessment (PCA) and the ministry's English Exit Exam (EEE). The goal of these exams is to make sure each student adequately masters not only the competencies set forth in their program's ministry specifications, but those related to reading and writing (MESS, 2016).

**A diversity of potential will require a diversity of opportunities. In turn, this requires that equal opportunity be promoted as an aim and a key normative reference for the school system.**

The second facet of equal outcomes – that all social groups should be represented in college education and have the same opportunity to earn a diploma – is premised on the idea that all students, irrespective of background, context or characteristics, should have access to all career opportunities, including in the most prized fields, such as medicine and law (CSE, 2016). Establishing this form of equality is nevertheless more complex. Current efforts to ensure the equality of opportunities do not really take into account the fact that people do not learn at the same pace or have the same strengths and interests. The goals and options offered in schools are often the same for all students and lack possibilities for genuine adaptation to everyone's initial aptitudes and potential (ibid.). As well, there seems to be a strong connection between, on one hand, students' educational trajectory in secondary school and in college (public or private school, regular or enriched program), and on the other, the likelihood of their being admitted to a limited-enrolment program (ibid.). Equal outcome is thus often interpreted from a meritocratic perspective in which school prepares us to live in a society that reserves certain powers and positions for those who are 'most deserving' of them. Viewed in this way, the current school system enables those who are socially, economically, or otherwise privileged to succeed and disqualifies all others as the 'losers' (ibid.).

However, it is important to recognize that not everyone has the wish or desire to attend university and that some have different aptitudes and skills than those generally valued by society. As such, to ensure fairness, it is important to provide all individuals with genuine opportunities that will enable them to make career choices that are positive and sensible to them, i.e., that offer them freedom and an avenue for fulfilment and for utilizing their particular skills. Truly fostering equal outcomes requires establishing the means to enable students to succeed, while also recognizing the variety of their trajectories and other types of success – including in the context of trades in secondary school, vocational studies in college, and adult education (CSE, 2016 ; Sen, 2010).

### Equal treatment

Equal treatment is rooted in the desire to make sure all students are given quality and fair learning conditions, "even if, at the start and at the end of studies, individual inequalities exist and remain in students' abilities or competencies" (CSE, 2016, p. 36, freely translated). It is crucial to redress these inequalities by providing each and every student with the means to fulfil their (reasonable) goals; measures of equal treatment should benefit the most vulnerable, albeit without exacerbating the gap between the most- and least-advantaged individuals (Rawls, 1987 ; Sen, 2010). For the common good, some resources must therefore be distributed unevenly in order to achieve greater equity across the population at large.

This brings us to the principle of equity, which is realized by offering differentiated treatment that takes each individual's context and characteristics into account and hence is not applied to everyone the same way (CSE, 2016). For example, equal treatment can be seen at the college level in the requirement of standardized language exams: some allophone students may, upon request, be granted extra time to finish their exam because the language of instruction is their second language (MESS 2016). This measure of equity considers the personal and social circumstances of a fringe of the student population with the goal of giving them the same opportunities as others.

### THE PEDAGOGY OF EQUITY

Aside from equitable distribution of resources, equal opportunity strives to make sure each student has a quality educational experience that enables them to develop to their full potential. This means offering students open learning situations in which they feel valued and acknowledged. In the classroom, this can be done by leveraging, "their questions, concerns, areas of interest,



and personal knowledge for learning purposes, and nurturing their ability to make choices” (Archambault & Richer, 2007, in CSE, 2016, p. 22, freely translated).

**The pedagogy of equity offers strategies to make sure everyone, including the members of minority and marginalized groups, has a quality educational experience.**

Thanks to the awareness it raises, the pedagogy of equity offers up courses of action for teachers hoping to improve the educational experiences of their students, specifically in connection with the social division of resources, power, and knowledge (Solar, 1998). Born of a convergence between feminist, antiracist, and liberating instructional approaches, the pedagogy of equity promises democratic emancipation and naturally applies to college education, given its goal of concretely bringing about equal opportunity. Its feminist roots call for a better representation of women in educational thinking, its antiracist underpinnings urge us to take race issues into account in our actions, and its liberation-focused foundations invite us to critically examine the role of education in order to enable dominated classes to achieve social emancipation. These three underlying pedagogies share the same goal of embracing difference and challenging the assumptions behind established societal norms (Weiler, 1991) so that each individual can feel valued in both their diversity and their potential.

### KEYS TO THE PEDAGOGY OF EQUITY

The pedagogy of equity offers four keys for taking action and helping teachers implement strategies to promote equal opportunity: speech, inclusion, active participation, and empowerment (Solar, 2007). The following briefly presents the aspects to consider.

#### Voice

At the personal level, speech allows a person to exist; at the social level, it allows the social group to take action. Giving voice to marginalized groups helps bring them out of invisibility and to feel valued. The pedagogy of equity systematically includes strategies focused on speaking up, both orally and in writing, such as facilitation techniques that stimulate conversation in small groups, in order to encourage individuals to share their experiences, and, in some cases, to spark dialogue on know-

ledge. Speech brings visibility to individuals and marginalized groups, empowering them to express what they would like to be recognized or changed. By extension, it could also be said to use of inclusive language or efforts to remedy the absence of certain groups in instructional materials.

#### Memory

On this last topic, the pedagogy of equity addresses the omission of certain dominated or marginalized groups within discourses and instructional materials by promoting a recognition of their contributions, knowledge, and experiences. By providing an educational space for legitimizing experiences and critiquing knowledge that is not inclusive or representative of diversity, teachers can place value on the diversity of points of view and allow students to share their intuitions and emotions. Hence, memory serves as a means of overcoming the vacuum of identity that some groups experience.

#### Active participation

Establishing a climate conducive to learning, where every member of the group feels respected, is fundamental to promoting equal opportunity. First and foremost, this requires us to pay special attention to educational relationships with students and to interactions between students. It also demands that we break free of the stereotype of the passive student. Establishing cooperative structures for active learning can enable students from dominated groups to play different roles than the ones to which they are usually confined. Given that marginalized individuals generally tend to gravitate toward situations of collaboration rather than competition, active participation can offer all parties a favourable context for learning (Briskin, 1990 ; Solar, 1998). Finally, it also prompts individuals to build their own knowledge and to define their own learning goals.

#### Empowerment

Given that the pedagogy of equity emphasizes social change, teachers can, in addition to giving learners a greater role in the classroom, strive to demystify the contents of their teaching by explaining their constructs, strengths, and limitations. This fosters a genuine appropriation of knowledge and the development of critical thinking, two crucial reflexes for reflecting on action and acting on thought. Empowerment can be realized via the establishment of frameworks for taking ownership. Teachers opting for the pedagogy of equity will also want to teach ways of doing things that are conducive to social justice, ultimately giving students the tools to affect social change.



## CONCLUSION

Concretely realizing equal opportunity requires equality of access, learning, outcomes, and treatment. As a result, this aim of the education system relies on the principle of equity. Legendre establishes this clear relationship in his definition of equal opportunity as the:

“fundamental principle of educational democratization that recognizes each individual’s right to equity and opportunity, without exception, and independent of their geographic, cultural, economic, social, and other characteristics, with a view to their optimal development and lifelong learning” (2005, p. 543, freely translated).

Equal opportunity is nevertheless a demanding goal, as it lies at the interface between individual interests and the common good (CSE, 2016). The efficiency and relevance of means for promoting the development of each young person’s full potential depend on the recognition and social acceptability of these solutions. Moreover, the principle of equality is also subject to each individual’s freedom, which implies that each person has a responsibility to assume the consequences of their choices. It is up to them to take action. Does this mean that anyone who does not succeed has failed to take advantage of the opportunities available to them and must bear the burden of their failure? If the opportunities they are offered do not take into account their potential or are not adapted to their initial aptitudes, it is the system that has proven inadequate (*ibid.*).

Schools that are attentive to student needs do not take equal opportunity for granted, but question their own ways of doing things. They acknowledge young people’s diverse strengths and utilize them to provide students with experiences that will give them confidence in their ability to learn, and, in doing so, the desire to learn. They enable each individual to feel acknowledged and valued, using their interests and concerns as springboards to success. They will offer a variety of models of success, and educational options that meet the diversity of profiles and needs.

One teacher alone cannot brave the social and academic injustices persisting in the college network. Yet any teacher can adopt a transformative leadership style in their instruction, and, in doing so, challenge the ways of using power and privileges that create or perpetuate unequal opportunity. The pedagogy of equity is one avenue for achieving this goal, in that it provides strategies to make sure everyone – including minority and marginalized groups – has a quality educational experience. ●

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