

Equity and inclusion in education: Finding strength through diversity

Governments and education policy makers are increasingly concerned with equity and inclusion in education due to several major global developments such as demographic shifts, migration and refugee crises, rising inequalities, and climate change. These developments have contributed to increasing diversity and warrant a reflection on how to foster greater equity and inclusion of all students in education. The 2023 *Equity and inclusion in education: Finding strength through diversity* report synthesises the main findings of the OECD Strength through Diversity project. It presents a holistic framework for studying diversity, equity and inclusion in education, structures the analysis in five key policy areas: governance, resourcing, capacity building, school-level interventions, and monitoring and evaluation. Moreover, it provides examples of good policies and practices, and offers policy advice on promoting more equitable and inclusive education systems.

Key findings of the report

Education systems vary in terms of defining and conceptualising diversity, equity and inclusion in education. Each system has developed its own definitions, which reflect its history, priorities and educational goals. Based on the Strength through Diversity Policy Survey, the most common elements mentioned across definitions of equity and inclusion are: a focus on specific groups of students and eventual gaps across groups, emphasis on access to education for all students, the provision of equal opportunities to all, and attention to discrimination or exclusionary practices.

The differences in definition create considerable challenges for comparative analysis across systems. Thus, the project has adopted specific definitions of the two concepts to provide a common understanding of equity and inclusion in developing its analysis.

Equitable education systems are defined as those that ensure the achievement of educational potential is not the result of personal and social circumstances, including factors such as gender, ethnic origin, Indigenous background, immigrant status, sexual orientation and gender identity, special education needs and giftedness. **Inclusive education** is defined as “*an on-going process aimed at offering quality education for all while respecting diversity and the different needs and abilities, characteristics and learning expectations of the students and communities, eliminating all forms of discrimination*”, following UNESCO’s definition.

Regardless of definitions adopted, there is not a single pathway that all education systems should follow towards equity and inclusion. The journey and challenges for each education system will be different, shaped by their unique histories, cultures and population demographics. However, the report identifies **the six key steps** (summarised in [Box 1](#)) that are universally relevant for education systems striving to build greater equity and inclusion. These steps should be undertaken in parallel, reflecting the fact that advancing equity and inclusion in education requires a holistic approach involving different policy areas.

Box 1. Six key steps to foster equity and inclusion in education

Develop a policy framework on equity and inclusion and embed it in all areas of education policy

Developing an equitable and inclusive education system requires a holistic approach, through the adoption of a comprehensive policy framework to ensure that education systems incorporate equity and inclusion in all relevant area. It should focus not only on student achievement, but also well-being.

Ensure that the education system is flexible and responsive to the needs of students

Responsiveness and flexibility in all aspects of an education system are key to support different students and their needs: through an inclusive curriculum, or adopting various teaching strategies, and applying differentiated instruction, education can address each student's unique needs, talents and aspirations.

Include equity and inclusion as principles of both the main resource allocation mechanisms and targeted funding of the education system

The way funding is allocated to schools and students has fundamental implications for the equity and inclusion of an education system. It is thus important to ensure that both main allocation mechanisms and targeted funding employed by countries are designed with the explicit goals of fostering equity and inclusion in education, and their use is balanced to avoid possible drawbacks.

Engage all relevant stakeholders in implementing the policy framework in schools and classrooms, strengthening coordination.

A range of stakeholders (teacher unions, parents and students, etc.) contribute to shaping and implementing policies to promote equity and inclusion in education, and should thus be engaged meaningfully throughout the policy cycle. Their involvement is key not only for the application of inclusive polices, but also for the creation of positive school climates and for awareness raising.

Prepare and support teachers and school leaders in developing the competences and knowledge areas for promoting equity and inclusion.

To create equitable and inclusive learning environments that support all learners in achieving their educational potential, teachers need to be equipped with a range of competences, knowledge and attitude. It is fundamental that education systems prepare and support teachers to promote equity and inclusion, through both initial teacher education and continuous professional learning.

Identify students' needs, support them and monitor their progress.

Identifying students' specific needs is fundamental to promoting equity and inclusion in education: this includes leveraging diagnostic assessments to identify student learning difficulties; planning for appropriate support; equipping teachers with tools such as Individual Education Plans, curricular accommodations and modifications; and using a variety of assessment formats to monitor student progress in an inclusive manner.