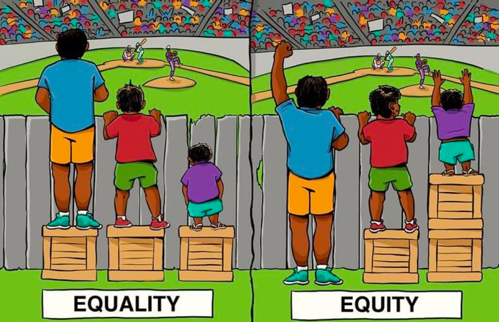
This essay explores the concept of inequity and how it is reflected in policy, curriculum, and the leadership practice perspective in early childhood education. The topic was inspired by the tenor of educational inequity discussions that emerged not only during my graduate classes, but also while working in the education field during a pandemic. COVID-19 tragically amplified the inequities prevalent in the educational system making such disparities harder to ignore. Fortuna et at., (2020) articulated in their study that COVID-19 has underscored existing inequities for children, families, communities of color, and those living in poverty.

I have personally witnessed and experienced the lack of resources and support for public school students who belong to the lower socioeconomic (SES) bracket. Many of my son’s classmates had insufficient access to internet and technological devices. They struggled to attend classes remotely. A few of them needed support and guidance from their parents to navigate the use of technology. However, with both parents working, these students were left to figure things independently. I have also seen one of my preschool teachers, a single mom, struggle with her special needs child who can no longer receive the same support he was getting at school. She now had to juggle working while teaching her special needs son. Juxtaposed were the children of parents with higher SES from the same public school as my son, who were quickly enrolled in private “pandemic learning pods” led by a certified teacher, hired solely for the endeavor. Our local public school’s feel-good motivational cry of “We are all in this together!” was disparaging to hear because we certainly were not all in this together.

Inequities in education have long been discussed and debated as the cause of achievement gaps and other harsh consequences in our society (Kozol, 2012; Wiggan, 2007). A preponderance of research demonstrates that educational inequities begin early and often persist throughout a student’s academic years (Brayboy, et al., 2007; Darling-Hammond, 2007; deMarris & LeCompte,1999). These inequities begin before kindergarten and last a lifetime (Yoshikawa et al., 2013).

     Delving into what inequity is and is not necessitated narrowing down equity’s definition. Though used interchangeably, equity and equality mean two separate things. In educational jargon, the definition of “equality” and “equity” has been often conflated (Castagno, 2008). Equal does not mean equitable.

     Equality in education is tied to fairness, where all students are treated the same and given access to similar resources (Jurado, 2020). Conversely, equity goes beyond what is fair. Educational equities are policies and practices that consider individual students’ needs to help them acquire more in-depth learning, which in turn makes them self-sufficient (Darling-Hammond et al., 2014). The Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) released a report that defined equity more thoroughly. The OECD (2012) states that “equity in education means that personal or social circumstances such as gender, ethnic origin or family background, are not obstacles to achieving educational potential (fairness) and that all individuals reach at least a basic minimum level of skills (inclusion).” To further illustrate the difference, I will use one of the images used in my Culturally Responsive Leadership class:



*Figure 1.1: A simplified visual of equality versus equity*

In this image, everyone has the same type of tool (box) to watch the baseball game. The same number of boxes that were given to each person in the drawing demonstrates equality. The box symbolizes fairness. Everyone is treated the same and given the same support regardless of their individual needs. In education, equality means the same curriculum, resources, and funding to succeed. On the right side of the picture you have the box size “fit” the need of each person, so that they can all watch the baseball game. The goal of education is to strive for equity. Consideration should be given to customized tools and adaptable support for each student’s needs in order to thrive.

In ECE, the issue of equity or lack thereof continues to be debated. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) drafted a position statement in 2019 to respond to ECE inequities. Its position statement calls for the following steps to support equity in ECE: implementation of high-quality learning programs that teaches to the whole child (child’s unique traits, family and cultural background, language, etc.) and work towards eradicating educational outcome differences that are brought forth by a child’s background.

Inequity in Educational Policy

     In my Educational Policy class, the takeaway was simply this: there isn't anything linear or direct about policy implementation. This class forced me to ponder the various state and federal educational policies and whether they effected the intended results. I narrowed my focus on the Head Start program because of its relevancy to my field of education.

Head Start was created to serve disadvantaged children and their families by providing comprehensive programs that target the whole child (Rose, 2010). Its mission is to help alleviate families from poverty by addressing children's developmental goals, self-sufficiency goals for adults, and support for working parents. As beguiling as the mission of Head Start is, it continues to draw criticisms about its effectiveness (Barnett & Hustedt, 2005).

Policy issues that give rise to racial inequities, lack of accessibility to high-quality programs, and an outdated enrollment qualification criteria are only a few of the controversies riddling Head Start (Garces et al., 2002, Henry et al., 2012). A major problem lies with the different perspectives held by the actors/stakeholders and the private sector providers, resulting in a cacophony of visions on how Head Start should achieve its goals. Since the public and private sector advocate for different agendas, their involvement has fragmented any coalition that may implement Head Start’s much-needed policy change (McGuinn et al., 2012; Skerry, 1983).

I do not work in the public sector, and I was ignorant of any policy or issues in the public school arena. This admission is an embarrassment, considering my son is part of the public school system - while I eat, breathe, and live for early childhood education research. After reviewing the various studies and perusing the assigned course readings, I came to recognize the weaknesses in certain policy infrastructures, some inherent and some systemic. I became a convert and a believer in the science behind brain development, the benefits of investing in high-quality ECE programs, the advantages of cultivating skilled ECE educators, and the power of one’s voice in policymaking. All this has driven me to join local (e.g., BFTS, GAEYC, QRIS) and national associations (e.g., HighScope Educational Research Foundation, NAEYC) that raise awareness for the inequities prevalent in ECE.

*Inequity in Curriculum*

Quality preschool programs have a significant impact on predicting children’s future success in their academic, professional, and personal lives (Duncan & Magnuson, 2013; Weiland & Yoshikawa, 2013). Parents hope that by sending their children to school, their children will be ready for success. However, not every parent will find this opportunity and access since geography (zip code), race, and income, are factors that affect enrollment in quality programs (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2019).

These factors contribute to inequities in education.

A school’s curriculum can exacerbate these inequalities. A high-quality curriculum is culturally relevant, provides an opportunity for family engagement, and sets expectations for academic mastery (Lalor, 2016). Furthermore, Wehmeyer & Field (2007) identify important curriculum content areas such as goal setting, choice-making, problem-solving, decision making, student-directed learning, self-advocacy, and self-awareness. Concurrently, Spring (2018) proposes that a school’s curriculum should be designed to provide the knowledge and skills for a happy and healthy life to address stress from social inequality.

During my Inclusive Curriculum and Assessment class, we were asked to identify a problem that impacted our students’ success and create a resource that would address that problem. I chose “Redshirting” in pre-kindergarten: the act of holding a student back an academic year before kindergarten to possibly gain an advantage in physical, emotional, or academic growth (Dhuey, 2019). Studies in redshirting show that redshirted students were commonly boys who were not economically disadvantaged (Dhuey, 2019). The problem is that the children who needed quality learning the most were least likely to get it because their families do not have the financial resources (Hover, 2018). Upon completing the class, together with my preschool team, we created a curriculum that considers the whole child and his readiness for kindergarten. We also adjusted our curriculum goals to allow for differentiated instruction depending on each student’s abilities. This move allowed our school to cultivate a more inclusive learning environment for our students and mitigate potential educational inequities that arise from SES differences, cultural backgrounds, and race.

*Inequity in Leadership Perspective*

Educational leadership programs have been trying to address inequities in schools by providing educational leaders with tools to create a more inclusive learning environment. During my coursework thus far, our class readings and discussions have revolved around how to advocate for change in our respective educational fields. Courses such as policy making and analysis, curriculum and assessment design, concepts of leadership, and organizational framework were constructed to challenge our current assumptions when it came to being a culturally competent and responsive educational leader.

  In one of the case studies we read for class, I walked through a principal’s experience on how she believed that developing and maintaining an inclusive school was a very delicate process (DeMatthews, 2015). Applying this to the ECE setting, it was important for me to create actionable items to address the significance of race and inequities in the early years. Together with my preschool team, we performed an equity audit of our preschool. By undergoing an honest equity audit, we scrutinized our program and identified areas that contributed to inequality in our school. We looked at teacher qualifications, the school's physical environment, instructional materials, the language we use, as well the posters we hung in our classrooms to ensure that these areas promoted inclusivity and equity.

In addition, in our Leadership for Change in a Diverse Society class, I learned how to create a cultural autobiography. This activity allowed me to understand my own cultural identity and how it interacted with others in the workplace. That exercise was so powerful that I shared it with my fellow ECE leaders. I sent a proposal on how to become a more culturally responsive leader to the Georgia Association for Educators of Young Children (GAEYC) for presentation at its annual conference last October 3, 2020. The proposal was accepted and I shared with 45 other Georgia ECE leaders how cultural biases and other inequities in the ECE setting can be addressed.   
 Change can be a slow process, especially when the issue is as daunting as equity. There is still much to do and improve in attempting to achieve educational equity. As current and future leaders, we need to pursue further education and build our knowledge and experiences while working with our stakeholders. It is imperative for educational leaders to continue to be self-aware and self-reflective in becoming equity-minded professionals.

In sum, though it seems like equity in education is unattainable, it is possible. Based on our coursework and additional readings completed for this essay, there are ways to support this objective: revamping the way educational resources are distributed, providing students with resources that meet their needs, conducting equity audits, being aware of our own biases, and being active advocates for educational equity. Brené Brown (2018) said it best - daring leadership means cultivating a culture of belonging while simultaneously encouraging diverse perspectives. As educational leaders, we need to rumble with our vulnerability and show up steadfastly to be champions of educational equity.

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