AUDITING EDUCATIONAL EQUITY in Light of the Covid-19 Pandemic

A Guide for Education Unions

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Cover picture: Teaching High School Students during COVID-19, USA, 15/09/2020 / RichVintage, Getty Images

Image credit: © UNICEF/UNI355856/Panjwani

INTRODUCTION

Background

There is a general consensus that **the global Covid-19 pandemic has not caused, but rather *deepened existing structural inequalities within education*,** making them more visible and exposing a 'global crisis for teaching and learning'. During the many months since the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared Covid-19 a global pandemic, education stakeholders, including education unions, have been sounding the alarm about the equity issues that underpin those inequalities, and have become more acute:

- As a result of the closure of education institutions and the introduction of distance teaching and learning measures during lockdowns;
- With the return to classroom teaching in full or partial reopenings;
- In circumstances where new partial or temporary closures have taken place after reopening where students or staff have contracted Covid-19; or
- When new restrictions that have been reintroduced to suppress the virus have impacted the education sector.

Inadequate or non-existent distance learning infrastructures have not only led to unequal access to education during the pandemic, but also increased the likelihood of student dropouts as education institutions are reopening. There is emerging evidence that the closure of education institutions may have further widened the achievement gap between students from advantaged and disadvantaged backgrounds. The circumstances in which students have returned, are returning to education, or still remain out of the classroom are unprecedented.

All of this gives rise to a number of questions about how quality education can continue to be provided and the needs of students met in the continuing pandemic. How can education institutions be supported to adequately assess the learning and well-being needs of students in the current situation? How can educators and education support personnel

be given the resources, support and time required to meet those needs? In what ways can education unions and parents mount effective calls for governments to provide the necessary resources to address the deepening equity gaps triggered by the pandemic?

Equity audits can be carried out in order to analyse the impact of full and partial closure and reopenings on students, including on their well-being, levels of learning loss, student dropout rates, and the accessibility and effectiveness of distance learning during lockdowns. Equity audits can also be carried out to assess the pandemic's impact on educators and education support personnel, including on their well-being, workload, and working conditions as well as access to support and to distance teaching tools and materials during lockdowns. Equity audits can be conducted as separate processes for students and staff or as a combined analysis of the impact of the pandemic on both groups.

Why Should Education Unions Call for Equity Audits?

Equity audits are systematic assessments of levels of inequity and the extent to which they are exacerbated by existing policy priorities. For the purposes of this Guide, the focus is on the extent to which equity issues in education have become more pressing as a result of the measures introduced to respond to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Lack of equity is one of the most pernicious barriers to achieving the universal human right to quality education. As inequalities deepen and are made worse by the Covid-19 pandemic, additional resources and support for education staff and institutions are urgently needed to address them. Education unions are duty bound to protect and advance the right to education, and habitually do so. In this 'new normal' triggered by the pandemic, unions' advocacy efforts become all the more important.

There is a close link between the inequities that hamper so many students' ability to learn in the current context, and the inequities

that make it difficult for too many educators and education support personnel to provide quality education. The call for equity audits in these unparalleled circumstances, therefore, provides an opportunity for education unions to advocate for everyone in the education community who is negatively impacted by the pandemic.

Equity audits are an opportunity for participatory data gathering. When the process is collaborative and involves stakeholders from all sections of the education community, the outcomes of equity audits provide a solid evidence base that can be used for consensus-building and collective action.

Equity audits will be effective if school, college and university communities and the educators, education support personnel, students, and parents within them value their purpose and believe that they can lead to a decrease in the equity gaps within education. Education institutions and the communities in which they are located must own any such process of auditing. Education unions and their members are also best placed to assess the extent to which equity issues within education have increased as a result of full or partial closures and full or partial reopenings of education institutions. Consequently, equity audits should be planned, designed, and implemented with the full participation of education unions and education institutions.

Equity audits should be carried out as part of a self-evaluation process. Unions can request and discuss equity audits through existing social and policy dialogue mechanisms and/or use this opportunity to persuade governments to establish a joint body, which can enable negotiation on the nature of the auditing process, co-ordinate information gathering and commission independent research if needed.

A successful auditing process is one that strengthens consultation with educators and education support personnel on any necessary policy changes and the flexibility needed to meet emerging student and staff needs. Such processes can also inform and support the collective bargaining process or other modalities for negotiating decent working conditions

As defenders of the human right to education and the human right to decent work, education unions have a critical role to play in calling for equity within the education sector to be audited in light of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Purpose of the Guide

This Guide is aimed at education unions as they work at local, regional, provincial/state, and/or national level to ensure the equity gaps that have been widened and deepened by the Covid-19 pandemic receive urgent attention and remedy.

The purpose of this Guide is to support education unions as they advocate for governments to urgently address the key equity issues that have arisen within education as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. The outcomes of an equity audit can enable education institutions and systems to adapt more effectively in a Covid-19 'new normal' and help to undo the structures of inequality that prevent countries from realising the universal right to education.

The Guide is not intended to be prescriptive, but rather to provide EI member organisations across regions with an introduction to equity auditing processes within education, and an overview of key questions arising from the ongoing pandemic that need to be addressed through the auditing process.

The issues highlighted here are not exhaustive, and unions will be able to adapt the Guide to the specificities of their local and national contexts.

What is an Equity Audit and How is it Defined?

An **equity audit** consists of a 'collection of data relevant to equity, the organisation of those data in a clear and comprehensible way so as to facilitate positive change on the part of stakeholders, and the interpretation of those data to expose areas of both weakness and strength within [education systems and educational institutions] with respect to equity'.[1]

1 Atlanta Public Schools Equity Report 2014; p27; available in English only

An equity audit can uncover inequities at local, regional, provincial/state, and national levels, highlight the 'equity traps' to be avoided, and form the basis for solutions that will not only increase equity but also build resilience within educational institutions and education systems. The UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO)'s International Institute for Education Planning (IIEP), has defined resilience in education as: 'the ability of education systems and learners to withstand, adapt to, and recover from shocks and stresses'.[2] This is critical, as governments anticipate further waves of the Covid-19 pandemic, which could impact on the education sector in unforeseeable ways and worsen new and existing inequities within education.

An equity audit is most usefully conducted as ***a process*** that includes contributions from education unions and other key stakeholders within education. Audits can be conducted by an appointed group with a mandate to make recommendations that governments will be bound to implement.[3] Crucially, auditing processes should happen periodically, to enable monitoring, evaluation and learning over time and to enable education institutions and systems to respond to any emerging issues and adapt policies and their implementation as needed.

2 UNESCO IIEP (2015) 'Safety, Resilience and Social Security: Glossary of Terms'.
3 EI Discussion Paper: Restoring and Strengthening Education Systems in the Time of the Pandemic (July 2020)

Equity & Equality

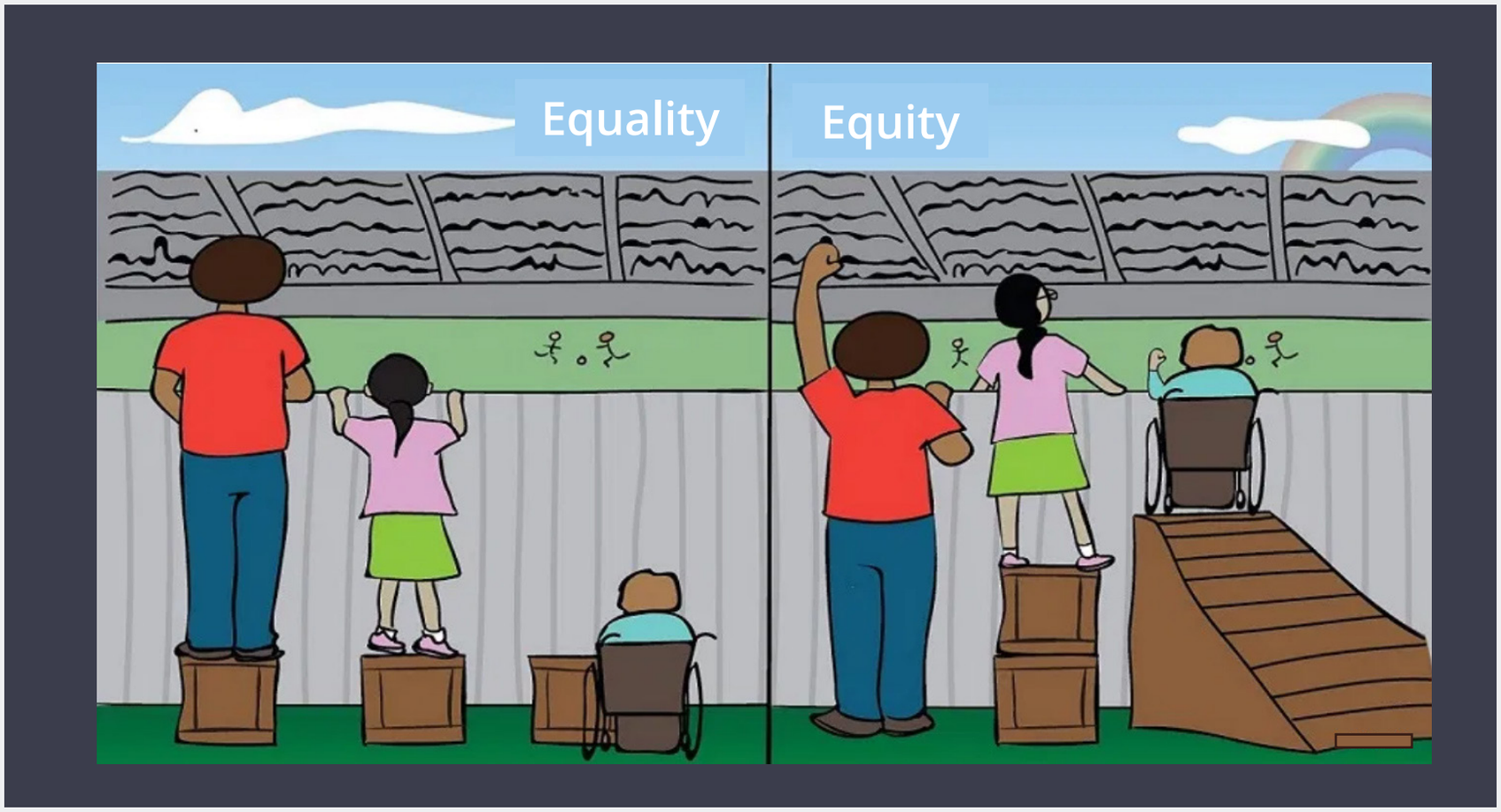


Image credit: Maryam Abdul-Kareem.

Although they are often used interchangeably, it is important to be aware of the difference between equality and equity and why the call is for *equity* audits to be introduced.

Equality means every student is treated the **same** way, based on the assumption that all students have the same needs. **Equity** means every student is given what they **need** to be successful, based on the understanding that students have different needs.

On the left hand side of the image above, three students attempt to watch a sports game being played on a field that is surrounded by a wooden fence. Each student is given a wooden box on which they can stand to see over the fence. The box gives the tall student the added advantage of being able to see well over the fence and enjoy the game being played on the field. The box allows the shorter student to only just be able to peek over the fence if she stands on her toes. The student in a wheelchair is unable to use the box and cannot see over the fence at all. In this image, all of the students are treated equally and given the same tool to overcome the structural barrier (the fence) that is preventing them from watching the game.

When educational policies aim to treat every student the same [equally], doing so may not be fair [equitable] because students have different needs. In the image on the right hand side, each student is given what they need to be able to watch the game (i.e. to overcome the structural barrier): the tall student does not need a box, because his height allows him to easily see over the fence; the smaller student is given two boxes; and a ramp is provided for the student in the wheel chair to do likewise.

In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, a policy to give all students a laptop to enable them to continue their lessons online when lockdowns were introduced is one that treats all students the same. However, this does not take into account whether all students have access to stable internet connection at home, nor indeed whether they or anyone in their household has the knowledge and skills to be able to use the laptop and make use of the online learning platforms and materials. Treating students equitably in this instance would require those who needed it to also receive support to access the internet and engage with online tools and materials, in addition to receiving a laptop.

The reasons why students have different needs are often due to structural inequalities such as poverty - in the example above poverty, rurality or both could be why there is no internet at the student's house. When students are treated ***equitably*** – i.e. all of their needs are met – then the ultimate goal of equality between students – i.e. all students accessing and participating in quality education - can be met.

Education unions are advocating for governments to introduce equity auditing processes in order to address structural inequalities caused by an existing lack of educational equity, which has been deepened, amplified, and exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Gathering Data on Minority Groups

The data collection that takes place as part of an equity audit aims to make structural inequality and discrimination visible and helps to identify measures that can help overcome inequities in education. However, there are also legitimate concerns about gathering data on persons from vulnerable groups as data can be misused to create stigma or even put minorities at risk.

It is, therefore, essential to involve persons from vulnerable groups in the design and use of data collection tools. In addition, when making decisions about publishing data, 'it is important to bear in mind that many individuals may not want to identify as members of such groups, usually for reasons of discrimination or social stigma.'[4] Ethical research procedures should be followed at all times to ensure data from individuals, their schools, institutions or communities remain confidential, and any risks clearly communicated to all parties involved.

Taking into consideration the specificities of context and available resources, some options for data collection could be:

- Focus group interviews with educators, students, and parents;
- Classroom observations;
- Information provided on Ministries of Education websites;
- Surveys;
- Government reports and assessment data.

Further guidance on how to gather data that is sensitive to privacy rights can be found in the United Nations Development Programme Resource Guide and Toolkit on Marginalised Minorities in Development Programmes (Tool 4. Collecting Quantitative Ethnic Data).[5]

4 Marginalised minorities in Development Programming, UNDP 2010.
5 This Toolkit is only available in English

Glossary of Terms

Accessibility:
tools and materials (e.g. via the internet) can easily be used by all, including by persons with special needs and/or persons living with disabilities.

Connectivity:
communications facilities (e.g. internet service, telephone systems, computer equipment, electricity, etc.) that enable users to connect to computer networks.

Digital tools:
programmes, websites or online resources that support the completion of tasks.

Distance education:
institution-based, formal education where the learning group is separated, and where interactive telecommunications systems are used to connect students, resources, and educators.

Distance learning:
any learning that happens without the students being physically present in the classroom.

E-learning platform:
software that provides the technical infrastructure to carry out distance education activities.

Special Educational Needs:
learning difficulties or disabilities that make learning harder for children than most children of the same age (e.g. physical disabilities, medical conditions, intellectual difficulties, emotional or behavioural problems). Children with special educational needs may need or be entitled to extra support.

Image credit: twinsterphoto, Getty Images

THE EQUITY AUDIT PROCESS

Setting the Stage

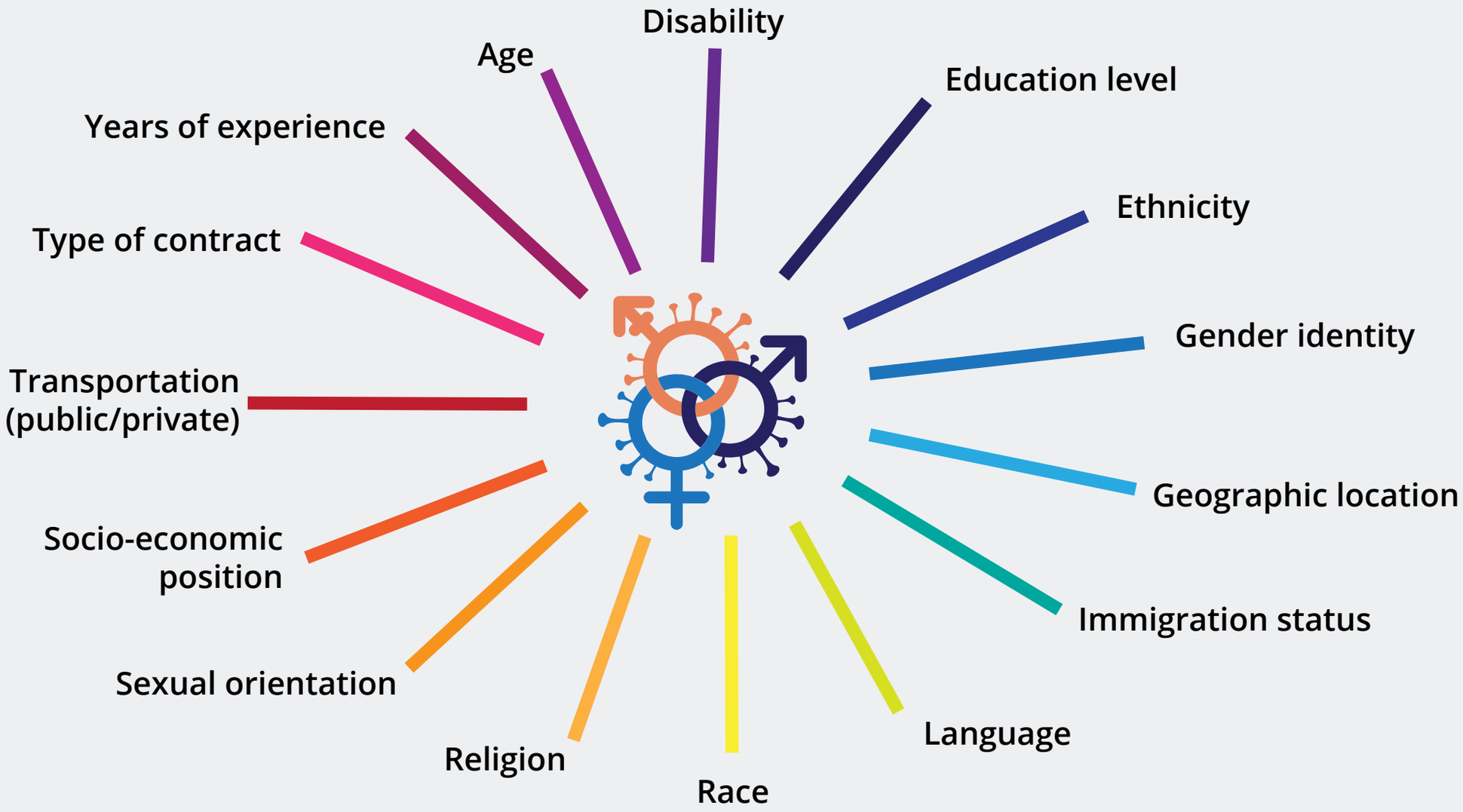
The Covid-19 pandemic has had far-reaching impacts on students, educators and education support personnel, and communities and education systems more broadly, deepening and exacerbating existing structures of inequity. The pandemic has also demonstrated the multiple roles played by schools and education institutions in the community, including the provision of school meals and primary health and social care services. This may present a challenge when defining the scope of an equity audit, and the inclusion of areas that may not usually be considered within the remit of the education sector. However, many of these services are provided by education institutions with the aim of addressing inequality, such as the provision of free school meals for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Consequently, a number of these areas are included in the overview below.

The key to a successful equity audit lies in asking the right questions for the context under consideration. Good questions can help uncover the data needed to outline a clear 'equity narrative', which can highlight the areas that need attention.

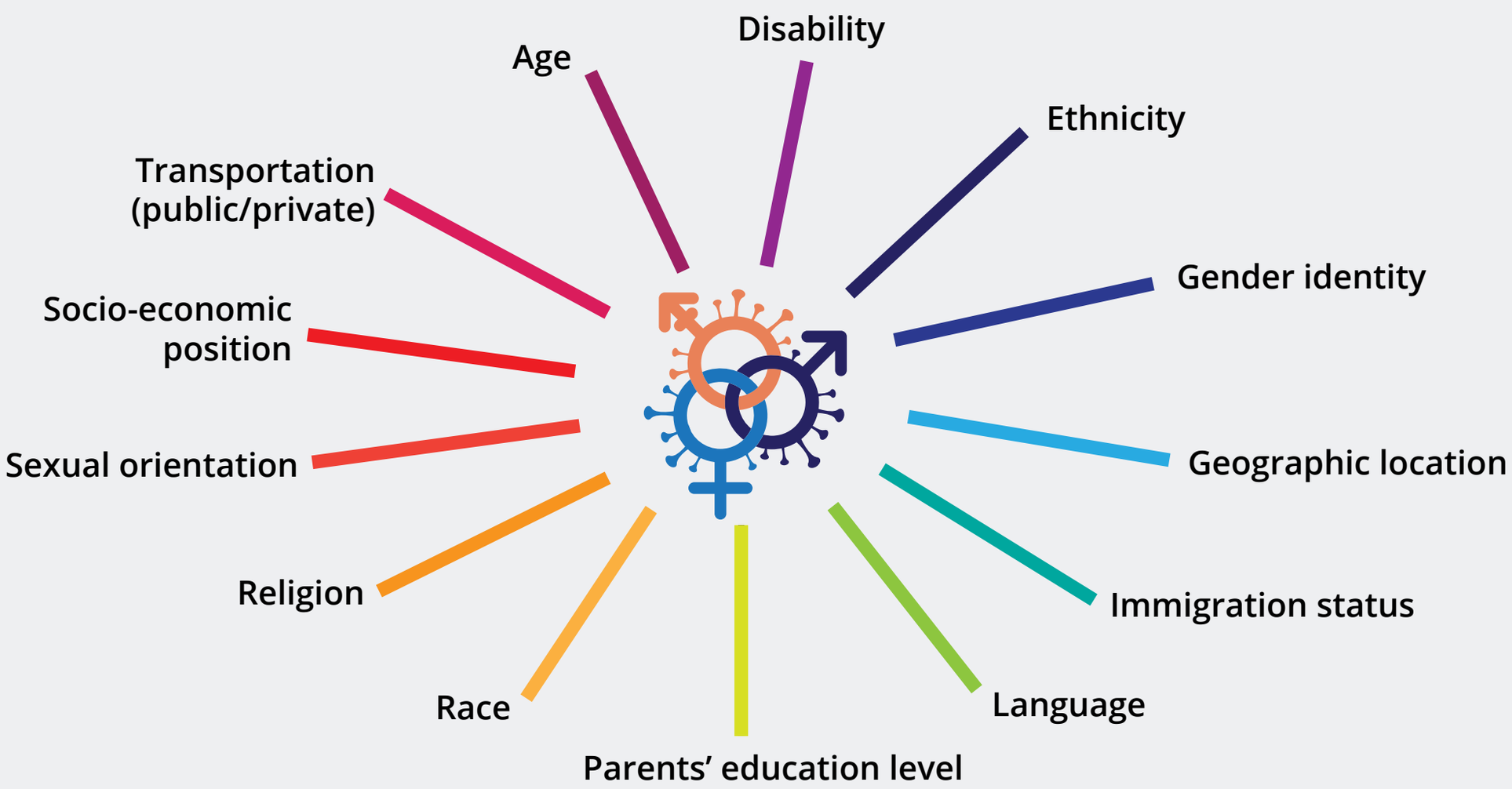
To understand inequities, an equity audit process must be a 'deep dive' into the factors on which they are based. This means questions must be asked about the factors that lead to multiple and intersecting discrimination in the lives of individual people and groups. These include, but are not limited to ability/disability, age, ethnicity, gender, gender identity, location, migration status, race, socioeconomic status, and sexual orientation. Discrimination is rarely based on one single factor. Rather, forms of discrimination intersect with each other to compound the resulting inequality.

It is critical that the questions posed during an equity audit process address the different ways in which gender, for example, intersects with other social factors - ethnicity, socioeconomic status, or ability, or with all of these factors simultaneously - to lead to acute forms of disadvantage that are difficult to overcome.

Teachers and education staff



Students



Key Questions for an Equity Audit in Light of Covid-19

A. Adapting Educational Systems to Respond to the Pandemic

- Were the arrangements made in response to the pandemic equitable? If not, which cohorts of students were most disadvantaged, and why?

  The arrangements made to respond to the pandemic include, but are not limited to the following:

  - Total closure of educational establishments (with/without the implementation of a distance education plan);
  - Partial closure of educational establishments (with/without the implementation of a distance education plan):
    - By region;
    - By educational level;
    - In-person classes for some students only (e.g. children of doctors and health care workers, students with special educational needs);
  - Continuation of school-based services during closures (e.g. provision of school meals, primary health, and social care services, inter alia).

B. Education Staff Working Conditions

- Contracts & Salaries:
  - What happened to education staff on short-term contracts – who was most impacted?

- Which education staff were adversely impacted by temporary unemployment schemes?
- Which education staff faced reductions or stoppages of salaries?
- Which education staff were adversely impacted by modifications to protocols for hiring and firing?
- Which education staff were adversely impacted by modifications to staff evaluation protocols?
- Were special measures for taking medical leave introduced?
- Which education staff have the right to paid sick leave?
- Which education staff have the right to their salary if quarantining due to infections in the classroom or in their household?

■ Staffing:

- Were there enough educators, education support personnel and specialised instructional support personnel to support student learning?
- Were there enough education support personnel to support student wellbeing and provide the necessary targeted psychosocial support?

■ Work/Life Balance:

- Did education staff who needed it have access to childcare and elderly-care support services?
- Was the workload of educators and education support personnel modified (increased)?
- Were any support structures put in place for educators and education support personnel, such as counselling and psychosocial support?
- Were overtime hours recognised and compensated?

C. Staff Training & Support

- Which education staff were provided with the necessary devices for carrying out distance teaching and other educational duties? Were these equitably distributed?
- Was all teaching staff trained in the use of digital teaching tools and e-learning platforms?
- Did any such staff training include a component on teaching students with special educational needs/addressing vulnerable students' needs?
- Was training provided to education staff on supporting students' social and emotional needs during distance learning, including on the use of instructional software to identify students in need of assistance or who may be in danger during lockdowns (e.g. trauma-informed distance learning)?
- Was education staff trained and supported to meet such student needs when onsite education resumed?
- Was education staff provided with training on how to comply with mandatory reporting requirements (e.g. to social services for students in danger, facing violence and/or abuse in the home during lockdowns)?
- Was education staff provided with training on rights related to data protection and privacy and the implications for distance teaching and learning?

D. Safety and Security

- Was personal protective equipment equitably distributed to students and to education staff?
- Did students, teachers and education support personnel have access to hygiene facilities and medical services during lockdowns and reopenings?

E. Connectivity

- Which education staff and students had difficulty accessing:
  - Internet services?
  - Stable TV/radio/phone/cell phone signal?
  - Reliable electricity service?
- Why did the education staff and students identified have difficulty accessing the services listed above?
- Were measures introduced to address inequities of access in relation to these services?

F. Teaching & Learning Tools & Materials

- Which education staff and students had difficult accessing:
  - Digital technologies and electronic media - computers, tablets, telephones, mobile phones, television, radio?
  - Printed materials?
  - Digital teaching and learning tools & materials, e- learning platforms?
  - A desk and a quiet place to study?
- Why did the education staff and students identified have difficulty accessing the services listed above?
- Were measures introduced to address such inequities of access?

G. Financing for Distance Teaching & Learning

- Was any targeted financial support made equitably available to students and teaching staff who need it to ensure access to remote teaching and learning? If so, how were beneficiaries identified?

- Was any targeted financial support made equitably available to ensure psychosocial support for educators, education support personnel and students?
- Was any targeted financial support made equitably available to ensure the safe reopening of education institutions?

H. Student Learning During the Pandemic

- Participation
  - Which students were unable to consistently participate in distance learning during lockdowns, and why?
  - Were measures introduced to support the learning of students with special educational needs?
  - Which students were unable to consistently complete homework/ assignments during lockdowns, and why?
- Assessments
  - Were assessment systems adapted to mitigate reduction of teaching and learning time?
  - Who was dis/advantaged by the methods of assessment chosen, and why?
  - Which students were unable to be promoted to the next grade, and why?
  - What kind of support is made available for students who fell behind?
- Dropout Rates
  - Who did not return to class, and why? The following factors may be taken into consideration, among others: increased child labour, early/forced marriage, early pregnancies, financial constraints, safety fears/violence during home-schooling, lost learning during lockdowns.

I. Student Support

- What training was provided to students on the use of e-learning platforms and digital tools?
- Which students needed support or were unable to access digital learning tools and/or printed materials, e-learning platforms, and tools, and why?
- Which students were unable to access professional teaching and/or education support staff, and why?
- Was targeted support provided to 'vulnerable', 'marginalised' or 'disadvantaged' students?
- Which students were unable to access school/university-based services and/or community programs that were available prior to lockdown (including nutrition programmes, health services, counselling, language instruction, evening courses, etc.) and why?
- Were measures introduced to compensate for the lack of such services/programmes?

J. Support to Families

- Which families had access to before and after-care programmes for childcare needs before lockdowns and could not access such services during lockdown or reopenings, and why?
- Were measures introduced to identify households that qualified for additional support, as a result of the pandemic and its socio-economic impact?
- Which students did not have sufficient parental support for distance education/learning during lockdowns, and why?
- With which parents were educational establishments unable to establish and maintain contact during lockdowns or reopenings, and why?
- Was any support provided to parents/families on use of devices for distance education, e-learning platforms, etc.?

- Was support provided for the families of students living with disabilities?
- Which families were unable to provide students with home environments that were conducive to distance education and learning and why?

CONCLUSION

Image credit: Canada, 15/07/2020 / FatCamera, Getty Images

Education unions are duty bound to advocate for equity audits as part of their double mandate and commitment to upholding the human right to quality education for all and protecting the rights of education staff.

Equity audits generally have a much broader and more holistic approach than evaluations focused solely on student achievement. A number of countries have regular system-wide evaluations, which operate at the student, institutional and system levels. However, school, university, or college level evaluation systems are not designed to assess levels of inequality and to uncover the inequities that underpin them. Nor can they provide an accurate picture of the extent to which lack of equity is deepening the structural inequalities more starkly highlighted by the pandemic.

It is critical to ensure that other evaluations take place alongside equity audits without doubling staff workload. Educators must be enabled to collect and access data early enough to drive decision-making in a way that will positively impact the student cohorts of 2020 and 2021, without punitive measures or reprisal for underperformance.

Governments must be called on to provide additional funding for the auditing process, rather than further burden the already over-stretched and limited existing education budget. It is also essential that governments enable schools and other education institutions to allocate time and the professional development needed to carry out equity audits without educators and support personnel facing additional workload.

Time and resources must be made available for educators and support staff to implement the outcomes of the auditing process.

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