

## Chapter 66

# Equity, Equality, and Reform in Contemporary Public Education: Equity, Equality, and Reform

**Marquis Carter Grant**  
*Grand Canyon University, USA*

### **ABSTRACT**

*Principles of equity have largely been overlooked in the field of education in favor of an acute focus on equality. Brown vs. Board of Education challenged practices of separate but equal, maintaining that equality was the foundation on which education should be built if all students were to benefit from education. Without a dual consideration for both equity and equality, practitioners are limited in their ability to provide an appropriate education to diverse populations of children. It is not enough to give students the same access to learning opportunities and resources. Educators must also create individualized pathways to the learning environment if all students are to benefit academically.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Race and racism are not uncharted territory in public education. In fact, race is likely the most provocatively emotional subject when it comes to past and present contexts of the American public schools (Buchanan, 2015). There have been numerous studies and reports that have acknowledged the overwhelming effect of race on children's experiences in school. Racial bias can be traced back to the colonization of America and it remains interwoven into our social fabric over three centuries later as evidenced by the inability to resolve the problem of the achievement gap when it comes to black and brown children in the United States (Hipp, 2012). Race is a part of our natural fiber, ever present in the lives of teachers and students in the classroom. While modern classrooms are changing to reflect a more diverse student population, over 80% of the teachers in the classroom are White middle-class females (Banks & Banks, 2009; Landsman & Lewis, 2006). Many argue that this fact alone may shed light on why minority children are not meeting proficiency levels outlined in federal and state standards (Pritchett,

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2011). Not that teachers are intentionally causing a disconnect between teaching and learning, but the lack of understanding about races, cultures, languages and diversity may prevent some teachers from being able to meet the needs of all learners in their classrooms (Hipp, 2012).

After the Supreme Court ended de jure segregation in the public-school system, integration was not a voluntary act and was rarely welcomed with open-mindedness. Efforts to integrate schools were done so with reluctance for years after the *Brown* decision, with the Supreme Court announcing that “there had been too much deliberation and not enough speed” in desegregating public schools in the United States (Stooksbury, 2006, para.9) Once Black children were equally placed alongside their White peers in the classroom, they were expected to keep up with a curriculum that was more rigorous than which they were accustomed, expected to perform at grade level without the benefit of previous exposure to materials and continuously regarded as inferior if they could not demonstrate satisfactory acquisition of content area knowledge (Council of Great City Schools, 2012).

## **BACKGROUND**

### **The Beginning of Egalitarianism**

Since the landmark decision in Supreme Court case *Brown v. Board of Education Topeka*, the focus in education has been equality. Thurgood Marshall, an attorney for the NAACP, was a litigator for many court cases that challenged segregation, including *Brown versus Board of Education*. It was the tenacity of *Brown* that placed Marshall directly into the public eye and his victory in the case cemented him as a prominent figure in the Civil Rights Movement. Marshall would go on to become the first Black Chief Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court.

The argument throughout the case and much of post-Civil War United States was that continuing the practice of race separation was unconstitutional, even under the pretense of equal access to education. The truth is that even if given equal opportunities, many Black children would not experience the same level of academic access as their White counterparts. African American children had spent much of their lives laboring on farms, working to help support their families, spending little time getting formal education. Equal access to education would not be prescriptive for them, but equitable access to education might have been the stepping-stone towards new possibilities. Historically, the case referenced the fact that instead of equal access to necessary human and fiscal resources, African American children were educated in substandard schoolhouses, walked miles to get to school without the benefit of transportation and used antiquated books that had no relevance and kept them from true knowledge acquisition. So much attention has been dedicated to principles of equality that no one addressed

Equity and equality are often thought as being the interchangeable ideologies. As Parrett and Budge (2012) explained it, it is important for all students to have equal access to human and fiscal resources; however, we cannot assume that all students can take advantage of these resources. Examining this in the context of *Brown*, even after the decision was rendered and African American students were integrated into public schools, this did not necessarily advantage them (Dalton, 2011). While their Caucasian peers had been afforded an education that met the standards, African American children were not privy to the same level of academic rigor. Once they were gained equality in the public-school system, they still lagged because of their historical disparity in education that could be traced back to slavery, when it was a crime for any Black person to read or write. This is not to say that some African American

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