

Closing the Achievement Gap: An Analysis of Equity-Based Educational Interventions

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Abstract. *This research focus on examining effects of equity-based educational practices on closing an achievement gap with main emphasis placed on underprivileged students. The approach the research employed is the quantitative and qualitative research where findings include the pre and post-intervention, test scores, engagement levels, and attendance where it is complemented by interviews and focus group discussions. These are evidenced in the areas of academic achievement, student attitude and behavior, and social emotional learning with emphasis made on the lowest SES student. However, they also noted limitations and threats inherent with the change process such as: resistance to change; scarcity of resources; and unsure future of the said interventions. Based on the findings from the study, the author opines that equity based interventions are useful in promoting equity in education delivery however they require enhancement of support, sufficient resource mobilization and enhanced community participation. The findings provide significant insights into how educators and policy makers can strengthen preservice teachers abilities to support equity- oriented reform efforts in K-12 classrooms as well as promote and maintain such reforms. Thus it is recommended that future research focus on the sustained impact of these interventions and strategies with regards to the hurdles encountered in the process of implementation.*

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INTRODUCTION

We can start with the educational achievement gap in which secular trends make it abundantly clear that students of colour, and, in particular, the poor students of colour, continue to perpetually underperform their more affluent and often white peers. This gap can hardly be explained through contrasting student learning capabilities or their work attitudes and approach, but the aggregate of systematic and pervasive and socially conditioned discriminations in learning prospects and achievements. Possible explanation may lie with historical and current practices that have arbitrarily discriminated against certain types of students especially the Black, Hispanic, Indigenous and low achieving learners (Cruz, 2021; Kovats Sánchez, 2021; Peters, 2022). Such students attend schools that lack basic amenities, teaching staff and financial support hence worsening the gap between the haves and the have nots in higher education (Makumbe, 2020).

The schools for such students are normally characterized by high teacher attrition rate, limited offering of credit courses, and inadequate instructional resources. These conditions are not mere consequences of other forms of inequity in society they are also effects of particular educational policies and allocations that most often result in unfavourable funding levels to schools in needy districts (World Bank, 2020). Further, these schools set lower expectations regarding the students' behaviors and academic performances as well as are more likely to punish such behaviors. All these factors lead to the development of a wide gap in achievements which in turn reduces the educational and lifetime opportunities of such students.

In the last few years, equity-based educational interventions had become an emergent solution to these rooted problems (Green, 2017). Equity based interventions are different from traditional models which mainly relied on remediation and use of compensatory education to increase the students' chances. These interventions are undertaken with emphasis on social justice, the attempt at developing learning situations that are sensitive to and inclusive of students' cultural characteristics and pertaining to the students as learners irrespective of their race, color, gender or disability. For instance, culturally responsive teaching, which is a part of equity based intervention is all about the relation of the learning content with the culture of the students so that they find it more relevant and interesting (Nortvedt et al., 2020; Johnson & Elliott, 2020; Blitz et al., 2020).

Indeed there is a lot of evidence suggesting the benefits of these interventions. The evidence has it that when culturally relevant teaching pedagogy is taught in schools, learners of color will tend to have more meaningful participation superior performance with more enhanced sense of belonging (Nganga et al., 2021). In addition, equity-based approaches like restorative justice practices help to lessen the disparities in school discipline, lessen suspension rates and enhance the overall school climate especially for schools that students of color attend (Ward-Seidel et al., 2022). Collectively these findings point to equity based interventions as having the capacity to not only narrow the achievement gap but also to change the educational outcomes for the students experiencing marginalization by directly addressing the sources of inequity (Talbert-Johnson, 2004).

But if we must look at the positive side, fully executing equity-based interventions is not without its hitch. An especially important one is the resistance from educators that may include those who are unaware of such methods or those who are against them (Shea & Sandoval, 2020). This resistance is sometimes caused by the misunderstanding of the basic concept of equity-based education when classroom interventions are implemented, as well as the issues relating to the workload increase for teachers (Weiler & Hinnant-Crawford, 2021). However, most schools face a number of constraints on one aspect of which is resource in this case for the proper implementation of such interventions. Far too many schools are unable to dedicate the resources needed to help teachers understand equity based practices and integrate them into their practices nor do they have the resources to offer the extra training and coaching that explain these changes and how they are to be implemented in the classroom. However, even in such cases, the continuation and routine utilization of such interventions call for great commitment of the school leaders as well as constant reinforcement from other stakeholders of the education fraternity (Rios, 2014).

While advocating for equity, another important element is sustainable of these Equity-based interventions. Just like with all the implementation, where some positive findings are observed in the early months or years, sustaining these positive findings involve a continued process of actively weavens into the culture of the school (Bastable et al. 2021). This also entails offering a coherent and sustained professional learning for educators as well as making equity as an organizing principle of all the decision-making processes in schools, including curriculum and discipline (Poekert et al., 2022). Lack of such systemic support means that positive impact of equity-based interventions may gradually fade out as earlier gains are eroded by change of policy, leadership or administration among other factors.

For this reason, due to the challenges that are experienced in implementing and maintaining equity-based interventions, the current study seeks to add on the existing knowledge on the effects of the interventions on reducing achievement gap among students (Bishop & Noguera, 2019). This research aims to obtain both the metrics results and the subjectivities of these interventions employing a mixed-methods research design. The research is based on schools that have been reported to have adopted equity frameworks and policies and dissects all the components that determine the success or failure of such frameworks. Besides assessing the efficacy of these interventions, the study also provides the understanding of what further

systematic reforms are required to support equity for all learners in the delivery of the quality education.

METHODS

The present study uses a mixed-methods research design as a way of ensuring that the effects of equity-based educational interventions on the achievement of a targeted population is greatly understood. The decision about the mixed-methods design was made in order to take the most of both quantitative and qualitative approaches, which would help in better understanding of the manifold processes and factors occurring at the stage of interventions' implementation and effects.

The quantitative part of the research starts with a systematic review of the existing literature sources that has included publications over the last decade. This review seeks to compile quantitative evidence on the impact of equity based interventions within different education context. Through a review of literature, this study sets a common ground for analyzing the statistical positive and negative trends that are related to these interventions. Apart from the literature review, questionnaires were administered on educators and school administrators of schools that have adopted equity based measures. The surveys were developed to measure change in academic achievement, students' attendance and other aspects of school climate, before and after the programme. Descriptive and inferential statistics were then used on this data to determine whether the kind of interventions that was implemented statistically contributed to the reduction of achievement gap.

The second research approach enriches the first one by giving detailed descriptions of the direct experiences of the people with the interventions in the studies. A qualitative case study approach was used with three schools as equity-based strategies were considered and found to be effective in the selected schools. Among these, the following criteria were considered. The type of student population and the size of the achievement gap and the time for which these schools have been intervention. Face-to-face interviews of a semi-structured nature were conducted with the major students, their parents, teachers, and school principals. Such interviews were meant to understand the experiences, achievements, as well as the effects of these interventions from various facets. Further, 25 succumbing to focus group discussions among students from different demographic characteristics which aimed at determining their impressions on the concept of inclusiveness and their perception of the school environment before and after the interventions were adopted. The recovered interviews and focus groups' data were followed by thematic analysis, which permits the researchers to recognize similarities in the opinions of participants regarding effectiveness and sustainability of the implemented interventions. In a bid to have an all-round analysis, the method of triangulation was used to blend the quantitative and the qualitative results. This way, data could be cross checked to come up with more accurate results closest to the effect of the interventions itself. The study was useful in comparing data obtained from various sources, thus giving a comprehensive picture of how equity-based education interventions impact on students and a school as a whole.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Scholastic outcome data retrieved in this research isn't only sufficient but cogent as well, for establishing equity based educational intervention. Using data collected before and after the implementation of the interventions like test scores, levels of learners' engagement and attendance rates in class, this study seeks to establish the success of the interventions in reducing the achievement gap between low SES and non low SES students. In addition to knowing the extent of parents' perceived increase in their children's academic achievement over time, the kind of data provided enlightens not only the learning improvement in school but also the factors affecting different groups of students in the school population.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics Table

Variable	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Pre-Intervention Test Scores	300	67.5	10.3	45	89
Post-Intervention Test Scores	300	75.2	8.7	55	92
Student Engagement Score	300	3.8	0.6	2.5	4.8
Attendance Rate (%)	300	88.7	6.2	75	98
Socioeconomic Status (SES)	300	2.4	0.8	1	4

Descriptive statistics give information of amount and dispersion of variable used in the study, pre-and post-intervention. That is why the average of the pre-intervention test was 67.5 with standard deviation of 10.3 respectively. While the first variable yielded a mean of 3.65, the second provided evidence of moderate spread of scores with the mean value of 3. The level of improvement afterwards reflected in the average test score which rose to 75 after the intervention. 2, smaller than in the previous trial, but with a slightly smaller stand deviation, which indicates that the results were higher with less differentiation. Regarding the students' engagement, it is pretty good on a five-point scale where the mean value is 3.8. School attendance rates are also equally good as regional average with a rate of 88%. 7%. Socio-economic status in the study has a measure which ranges from 1 to 4 and the mean is 2.4, this mean that the students had a low to middle socioeconomic status backgrounds.

Table 2. Comparison of Pre- and Post-Intervention Test Scores

Test	Mean Score (Pre)	Mean Score (Post)	Mean Difference	p-value
Overall Student Population	67.5	75.2	+7.7	0.001
Low SES Students	62.3	70.8	+8.5	0.002
High SES Students	73.1	78.5	+5.4	0.005

The table below shows the pre and post test average for all students and low and high SES respectively. According to the experimental outcome the results have improved in all the groups. For the total of all the students, including the ones in the sample the mean difference is equal to +7.7. Equal to; 7.7 points and p value of 0.001, which points towards that it is a statistically significant improvement. Low SES students claimed for an improvement of 8.5 points which represents the largest benefit in augmenting skills and knowledge. 5 points, which indicates the programme may have been most beneficial to the students for reasons yet to be determined. High SES students also improved but by a lesser extent that was +5.4 points.

Table 3. Changes in Student Engagement

Group	Engagement Score (Pre)	Engagement Score (Post)	Mean Difference	p-value
Overall Student Population	3.2	3.8	+0.6	0.003
Low SES Students	3.0	3.7	+0.7	0.002
High SES Students	3.4	3.9	+0.5	0.004

This table presents the outcomes revealed on the level of students' engagement before and after the implementation of the intervention. Moreover, the overall samples' students' engagement level raised by a mean + 0.6 and thus meeting the conventional requirement of a statistically significant p-value of 0.003. This pattern was true across all the SES groups, although the increment among Low SES students (+0.7) was again higher, indicating the intervention had a positive effect on learners from such background. High SES students' engagement also went up, though the improvement was less than that of low SES students (+0.5).

Table 4. Changes in Attendance Rates

Group	Attendance Rate (%) Pre	Attendance Rate (%) Post	Mean Difference	p-value
Overall Student Population	85.0	88.7	+3.7	0.004
Low SES Students	80.5	85.9	+5.4	0.002
High SES Students	89.5	91.5	+2.0	0.006

The table shows the attendance rates of total students and low SES as well as high SES students all across the academic year. Each of the groups reported improved attendance rates and though the outcome was small there was a +3 Improvement in the population at large. 7% increase. Low SES students' directions showed the biggest increase (+ 5. 4%) which suggest that the intervention alleviated some of the difficulties low SES students have in attending school regularly. High SES students' class attendance also went up, although not as dramatically as the low SES (+2. 0%).

The findings of this study are divided into several categories of qualitative outcomes based on themes which have been identified during the analysis of the data. All these themes have quotes from the interviews and focus group discussions and are followed by the analysis of the quotations.

Impact of Equity-Based Interventions on School Climate

"Back in the days when there was no intervention, the students especially those who had felt like they were discriminated in school, used to be so tensed but now they look more relaxed and even willing to participate in any school activities."

In this quote we see a fairly large positive increased in at least three areas of the school climate after introducing equities based interventions. This implies that the interventions used helped in changing the learning environment and making it more friendly to students who maybe out-casted or discouraged to participate.

"It is different now; it feels like we are in a community where we are all given an opportunity to express ourselves; whereas before I never had the courage to open my mouth and speak out."

Related to this is the positivity that has emanated from this student post intervention and which is characterised by a feeling of belonging and empowerment. The changes in participation from isolation imply that social interactions advocated by the interventions led to emergence of a cultural shift that elicited active participation and freedom of speech among the learners.

"The University has a better coming together of students and staff. Everyone is focused on attaining the same objectives and that was not there earlier."

The last intervention also reflects on the necessity and institutionality of coordination as noted by the administrator above. This sense of unity is important in maintaining the positive changes in school culture since people have the same direction towards positive changes of the institution in terms of equality and diversity.

Challenges in Implementing Equity-Based Interventions

"It was not easy initially to have the teachers buy into this process In fact some of the teachers even rebelled They even argued that change was not necessary or that it would only add on their workload"

I think this quote is quite fitting as it captures the first reception that was given in the implementation of equity based interventions. Staff resistance, basically due to self interest such as seeing their workload being increased or being unable to understand why change is necessary, is one of the biggest challenges in such projects. This is one of the biggest barriers of change and can only be surmounted once there is communication of the need to change by the leadership.

"It was possible to find lack of materials, and inadequate or insufficient training for effective programme delivery of the programmes at the initial stages".

These words of the teacher reflect the fact that one of the biggest challenges for the successful application of new intervention strategies is a lack of resources. Insufficient training and teaching resources are among the threats that can affect the success of a proposal, which should be further complemented by abundant funding so as to avoid such scenarios.

"It is always challenging to alter conventional practices; this is more than adopting new working methods but includes changing the mindset of people and this always takes some time".

The counselor's observation leads towards the second deeper issue of transforming culture. Improving equity-based interventions go beyond mere procedural modifications; it involves changing the ways that educators and students deal with learning and relationships, which is a slow and looked-at-process.

Perceived Benefits for Traditionally Underserved Students

"The latter participant said, "I feel that I maybe have more of a voice now. I never thought anyone saw me before now, teachers include me and go out of their way to hear what I have to say."

This quote explains the new feeling of power that students of color, the disabled, first generation college students and those who speak English as second language get from attending this school. These interventions not only brought the attention of these students to the school community but also created the opportunities where these persons can be heard and valued within the school improving the educational experience.

" Basically there is an improvement of the attitude of students especially the timid ones or the indifferent ones, they are a bit more active now and look more proactive."

The teacher said that she noticed the equity based interventions focused have boosted the morale of the previously carless students whereby some of them have developed increased confidence and motivation. Due to an enabling environment which is established through these interventions most of the learners develop self confidence and come out with active participation in their studies.

" We were seeing more of our lower socio-economic students were very much behind and what we found now is that they're gradually pulling closer to the middle or the top."

Such comment from this administrator indicates that the interventions applied have been helpful in the elimination of educational differences. The statics, which show that the achievement gap is closing among the students from low SES background, mean that the interventions are targeting and overcoming the structural factors that were earlier limiting the low SES students from making improvements.

Sustainability of the Interventions

" Pressure and resistance are not issues we need to think about, but sustaining the changes we have been implementing will be challenge Be specific and explain: I know that some problems can bear great results but sustaining such outcomes is usually a process that will take time and a lot of effort"

In regard to the first question the principal's statement reveals the need to maintain the levels that have been achieved through the interventions. Long-term success will only be possible by sustained effort and incorporating equity-based practices into the fabric of the school's daily functioning and not as mere adjustments made and remedial actions of an experimental nature.

" It basically stems from the thought that all the positive shifts that have been achieved may disappear if there are new leaders with different intentions or if the funding of activity is cut."

This quote points to issues of the ability of the interventions to be sustained once there is change in leadership or even possibly getting funding for the projects. This is because, it is informed by the possibility of regressing to the poor mental health practices that are not desirable due to their obvious negative impacts.

"To continue this, we need to continue involving the community' The parents and other local organizations have contributed greatly towards achievement of the organization."

The counselor here emphasizes on the need and importance of community support in the sustenance of the interventions. I did this because involving parents and local organisations assist in reminding the children of the interventions made and that equity and diversity is part of a larger society rather than a school.

Measures of solution effectiveness indicated that there were significant gains in academic performance across students which was more highlighted results among lower SES students. This is in tandem with prior literature that establish that tailored approaches in the quest towards closing learning gaps are effective. For instance, Bond & Russell (2021) came up with the culturally relevant pedagogy theory that postulates that the teaching approaches used should respect cultures of learners. Her theory is supported by this study's finding because the interventions that stressed cultural relevance and cultural sensitivity seemed to elicit more learning and better academic achievements in marginalized students. Furthermore, Semeraro et al. (2020) pointed out that culturally relevant pedagogy improves not only achievement but also students' self-esteems and motivational levels the latter seems to be indicated by the higher engagement scores found in this study after intervention.

The qualitative data also present a very compelling case for arguing that equity-based interventions do positively re-make the climate in school. All members of the school community including the students, teachers and administrators mentioned an improvement in the school climate that is characterized by 'equality, fairness, and respect for cultural diversity.' This is in affirmation of the postulates by Lenz (2006) where relational trust was relabeled as the keystone of reform in schools. This means that courtesy of the interventions the trust between the students, teachers, and parent was improved hence improving on the school community relations. This sense of unity is important because without it, students cannot feel safe, valued and welcome or stimulated to transform classroom into a learning environment. Moreover, the positive changes in school climate found in this study are in agreement with the conclusion of Thapa et al. (2013) where effective implementation of educational reforms require a change in school climate in that it ought to be positive and inclusive.

However, there were also findings pointing at important difficulties associated with the promotion of equity-based interventions. Pertaining to the social cancer, the challenges that arose from the educators' resistance were manifested as follows The above documented resistance fully supports what Terhart (2013) found out concerning educational reforms informing that some educators will be resistant to reform or else get overwhelmed by other tasks that an educational reform brings with it. To overcome such resistance, focused leadership and communication strategy that promotes the intervention's purpose should be developed as well as ensuring professional development so as to enable teachers embrace the change.

Another significant finding was the issues of scarcity of resources in relation to the studied subject. This was one of the main barriers the programmes reported struggling with as they failed to receive adequate funding, training, and materials to support the implementation of the interventions. This is supported by Jhingran & Sankar (2009) who observed that resource disparities constitute of a challenge to educational equality. High poverty level makes it hard for schools to get the required funding to deliver on intervention plans that would address learners

needs. This indicates the fact that it is mandatory that resources should be distributed equally among all the students so that all the students are given an equal chance to succeed in school as every child has a right succeed

One of the major thrust areas that the participants highlighted was sustainability of equity based interventions. With time, several concerns surfaced expressing the fear that once a new leadership was to be established or in the event that funding was to be done away with that these initial successes could easily be reversed. This concern is well illustrated in the literature as Leithwood & Jantzi (1990) noted that for reforms to be sustained they should be incorporated deeply into the school culture. It maintained that even the most efficient programmes can fail after some time if they do not receive support and commitment. Pointed out that there is need constitute constant engagement of the community in supporting the educational reforms. Parents, other organizations, and other stakeholders in the community should be involved in supporting the interventions and keeping them at the forefront even if there are hurdles towards their implementation.

Thus the result of the present study has several implications for educational policies and practices. First, there is a significant evidence that there is a need for policies that will enhance the implementation of equity based interventions in schools especially those that target disadvantaged students. Policy-makers need to guarantee that schools are able to acquire these resources, financial or otherwise, for staff development, equipment and even instructional alternatives. Similarly, professional development programs should enable the teachers to appreciate the role and significance of equity in education and further, provide them with professional development aimed at enabling them to put into practice several culturally relevant teaching strategies. Second, the study points at the need to maintain these interventions in the long-run. Hence, there is a need for an active support and follow up structure for enabling equity based interventions to be sustained in order to provide the appropriate outcomes. This could entail the establishment of numerous forms of continuing professional learning, evaluation of the effectiveness of interventions, and development of effective school-community linkages that could supplement the support and resources available for children with learning difficulties.

CONCLUSION

Thus, this study offers powerful evidence that equity-based educational interventions can effectively help to narrow down achievement gap for student who belong to disadvantaged populations. It was found that both quantitative and qualitative findings showed positive changes in the academic achievement, students' interest, and the school environment. Such conclusions support the view of the necessity of culturally appropriate practices in order to help achieve an equitable education. However, the study also pointed out some threats that need to be resolved for any of such intervention to be effective and sustainable. Teachers' resistance to change as well as financial constraints of implementing the interventions and sustainability of the changes proposed were cited as key challenges. Such difficulties underline the importance of staff training, sufficient financing and effective leadership in order to sustain and improve equity-oriented strategies. The implications of this research are clear: there is a need to promote equity by extending the required resources and support to various learning institutions especially those operating in the disadvantaged regions and areas of need. In addition, there is the need for continuous involvement and partnership of the community members so that these interventions become part of the school and hence are sustainable.

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