

Series Editors: Rashmi Diwan and Charu Smita Malik

Module 4

# GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR SCHOOL TRANSFORMATION: EQUITY AS A CONCEPT

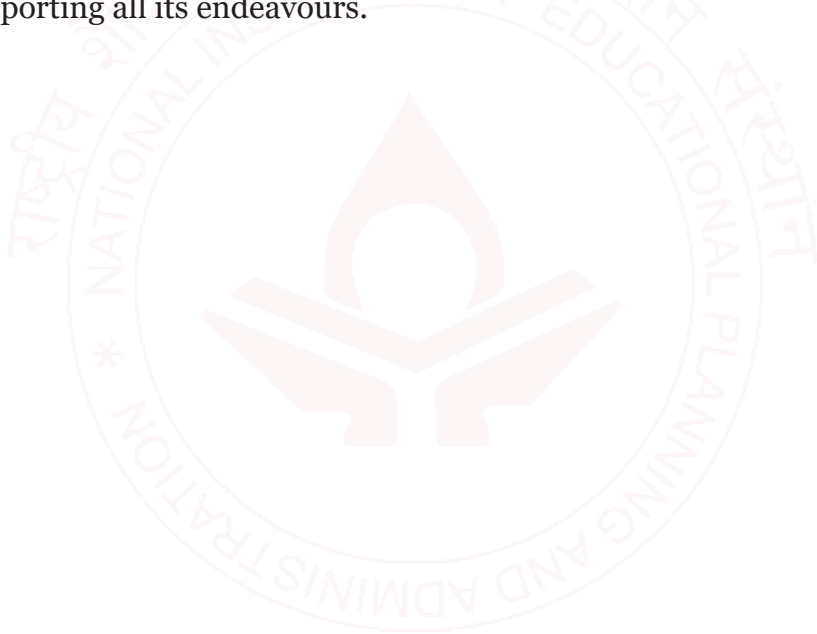
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**KEY AREA  
PERSPECTIVE ON SCHOOL LEADERSHIP**

**GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR  
SCHOOL TRANSFORMATION:  
EQUITY AS A CONCEPT**

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## Introduction

School transformation is a challenging task which requires fundamental changes or modifications in attitudes, mindsets, leadership practices, teachers' professional repertoire and classroom processes. To enable this process of change, a leader needs to expand her horizon to include perspectives which revolve around guiding principles hinging on certain values. Equity is one of the most cherished principles of our education system that encompasses notions of equal opportunity, need-based interventions and fair treatment. It is a value that needs to be upheld by each stakeholder linked to the school. What does equity mean? What is the scope of equity? How is equity similar or different in relation to other concepts? Is equity a mindset? If yes, what is the perspective shift required for gaining an equity mindset? These are some of the questions that are addressed in this module. The first section describes equity as a concept in relation to other concepts such as equality, diversity and inclusion. The second and third sections focus on examining some of the common beliefs held by school heads, teachers and educational functionaries regarding students' abilities, learning potential, school and classroom practices that can be termed as deficit or inequitable. Taking insights from relevant research studies, this module attempts to question beliefs and present alternative statements that can guide school leaders in creating a culture of equity mindset in their school.



## Learning Outcomes

**On completion of the module, school leaders will be able to**

- Acquire insights on the concept of equity and concepts related to it such as equality, diversity and inclusion
- Gain a perspective shift for developing an equity mindset in school

Sections	Topic
Section 1	Understanding the Concept of Equity in Relation to Other Concepts
Section 2	Perspective Shift for an Equity Mindset in School
Section 3	Perspective Shift for an Equity Mindset in School (Continued)



## SECTION 1

### UNDERSTANDING THE CONCEPT OF EQUITY IN RELATION TO OTHER CONCEPTS

**Learning Objective:** Help school leaders understand the concept of equity in relation to other concepts

**Key Words:** Equity; Equality; Diversity; Inclusion

## Introduction

Democratization of education rests on the principle of achieving equity in access, participation and achievement at different educational levels. The notion of equity has been central to many policies and operational guidelines in the Indian education system, such as the National Policy of Education 1986, Programme of Action 1992, Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan (RMSA) and most recently Samagra Shiksha. The draft framework for Implementation of Samagra Shiksha (2018), which is an integration of earlier centrally sponsored schemes of school education states, “Equity, to mean not only equal opportunity, but also creation of conditions in which the disadvantaged sections of the society – children of SC, ST, Muslim minority, landless agricultural workers and children with special needs, etc. – can avail of the opportunity”. Moreover, equity is not only a cherished goal but also regarded as an educational outcome. The scheme of Samagra Shiksha envisages universal access, equity and quality, promoting vocationalisation of education and strengthening of teacher education institutions as the major outcomes of its interventions. The National Education Policy 2020 also puts forth equity and inclusion as “the cornerstone of all educational decisions to ensure that all students are able to thrive in the education system.” The policy statements and implementation guidelines can be implicitly read to understand that one cannot achieve quality if the education system does not share its benefits with each student. For this, the system needs to be designed based on the principle of equity that ensures each student has access to high quality frameworks on education and is able to achieve her full potential.



## Equity and Equality

Equity is a ‘principle’ based concept and denotes whether a system or any school process is fair and beneficial to all or not. There is an element of correctness and justice attached to the principle of equity. Equality, on the other hand, denotes ‘sameness,’ without any judgement of being correct or not. Let us say: all children have equal access to textbooks and uniforms as per entitlement. Each child gets two sets of uniforms and textbooks of the appropriate grade. But, it is possible that there are a few children who avail of this opportunity but keep themselves absent from the school as they might support their family income. Such children may require some additional support or incentives to continue to come to school. This can be in terms of support through adjustments in school timings, cash incentives or time invested by principals/teachers in order to communicate with parents to create awareness about the benefits of education. Hence provision of equal materials to all children may fulfil the criteria of ‘equality’ but may fall short of fulfilling the criteria of ‘equity.’

It is also believed that equity and equality are not distinct terms. Equity incorporates within itself the notion of ‘equal opportunity’. In the above example, providing resources equally to **all** children fulfils the criteria of ‘equal opportunity’ but is only partial fulfilment of the principle of equity. In addition, a school leader must identify ‘need-based opportunity’ that could be in the form of provision of extra resources and additional time to children who actually need it. Going back to the example above: Are there some students who would require additional support by way of incentives so that they do not absent themselves from the school? Once these students are regular, they can make full use of the textbooks that have been provided to them. One can also ask: Do slow learners have access to additional/ remedial time from teachers? Do they have access to reading materials that help them construct their

learning in easy, simple ways? This would then qualify as providing need-based opportunity. Next, in order to understand the concept of equity fully, we need to look at another dimension --- that of 'fair treatment.' You may like to ask: if teachers in your school are treating students from low socio-economic background with prejudice or as equal to other students? What is the attitude of teachers towards children with special needs; are they being treated fairly with patience; are the teachers aware of the physical and psychological needs of CWSN?

Hence, the concept of equity includes three dimensions:

- Equal opportunity
- Need-based opportunity
- Fair treatment

## Equity and Diversity

Diversity represents individual 'differences' among individuals/students. This can exist in a variety of ways. The most popular notion of diversity in educational literature exists in terms of background of students; for example, a student may belong to the scheduled caste category, another child may belong to a migrant family or a few children may come from families whose annual income is meagre, so on. There are as many differences as there are ethnicities, religions, castes, classes or gender. One can also understand diversity in terms of difference in talents and strengths; for example, a student may be excellent in music or passionate about sports. It is important to understand that each individual student is as diverse as any other but all are an asset to the school. The principle of equity calls upon the school to cater to the needs of its diverse student population that may have different social or economic backgrounds, talents, aptitudes or learning needs. In schools where diversity is seen as a disadvantage, there are no need-based learning strategies in place and teaching-learning processes can be unfair to certain students. However,

equity requires considering diversity as strength of the school and not as a disadvantage.

## Equity and Inclusion

Inclusion refers to processes of engagement around certain defined principles. These principles can be equity, non-discrimination, gender equality, non-violent communication so on. Let us understand this through an example. A teacher finds that a few students have been teasing and bullying a student who belongs to a 'lower' caste. She decides to use story telling as a pedagogical technique to promote an inclusive classroom where there is no discrimination against anyone. She shares a story which depicts how discrimination can be demeaning for certain students and makes all students realise that everyone needs to be treated equally and without biases. In the process, if children understand the purpose of this activity, then it can be said that the teacher has succeeded in making classroom processes more inclusive. Inclusion as a concept is wide and there are many aspects to it, which you may like to learn in other modules. Thus, inclusion refers to processes which are initiated based on operationalization of value-based principles, to make students feel that they belong to one cohesive whole. Inclusionary practices aim at improving learning of each student.

## Leading Equitable Schools

In schools, we all know that diversity is a given- there are difference in student attributes such as learning pace, learning needs, background characteristics, aptitudes etc. A school leader needs to take initiatives to celebrate diversity and employ strategies to use diversity as an asset to the school. One can say that diversity exists on its own predominantly by virtue of coming together of a varied student population. On the other hand, equity and inclusion are principles that need to be first, upheld as part of the school's collaborative vision, and then **deliberately** designed

as part of school and classroom processes to ensure that each student accesses opportunities to develop her potential. A few action steps in this direction would be:

- Creating and enacting an equity vision for the school
- Fostering an equitable school culture
- Engaging in reflection on how to best model an equitable and inclusive school
- Collaboratively designing strategies for creating inclusive classrooms




### Exercise 1

As a school leader, discuss these concepts with teachers of the school. Seek their opinions on different dimensions of equity. Create a **shared vision** of your school keeping equity and inclusion at the centre.

### Let us sum up

In this section, we learnt that equity is a principle-based concept. There are three key dimensions to this concept --- equal opportunity, need-based opportunity and fair treatment. An equity focus requires the school to cater to the needs of its diverse student population, over and above providing everyone with the same measure of, let us say, infrastructure, resources or teachers. The principle of equity also becomes one of the guiding forces behind initiating and sustaining inclusive practices in school and classrooms.



## SECTION 2

# PERSPECTIVE SHIFT FOR AN EQUITY MINDSET IN SCHOOL

**Learning Objective:** Help school leaders gain a perspective shift for developing an equity mindset in school

**Key Words:** Equity; Perspective; Mindset; Attitudes; School

## Introduction

There are a number of ways to assess if a school system is equitable or not – by examining school admissions, school and classroom processes, learning outcomes etc. “Educational equity requires moving beyond a deficit frame, not only regarding systemic responsibility for structural inequities but also regarding the perception of non-dominant students and communities as “victims” of the system who lack resources, knowledge, power or contributions” (Ishimaru and Galloway 2014). This statement implies two things: one, the school must engineer mindsets and processes to offset inequities present within and two, the school must take ownership for learning of students belonging to disadvantaged sections rather than view them as victims, or ‘lacking in something’.

The pursuit of equity must involve consciously building on the cultural strengths and human potential of diverse learners. We need to enquire: Do we have what may be called an ‘equity mindset’? Do we, as school heads and teachers, possess the correct attitude towards different groups of children and the school experiences they must be a part of? In this section, we have tried to examine some of the statements that we often hear from school heads and teachers while addressing certain groups of children.

*Given below are a few generalised statements prevalent in many schools, voiced by school heads and teachers. These have become integral to the belief systems of many. Let us examine each of them critically.*

These statements range from generalisations about children’s social and economic backgrounds, educational status of their families, or perceptions about their learning abilities.

Let us read two statements in this section and understand them in light of what some of the researches say on equity. This is critical as having the right perspective and a correct attitude is the first step towards bringing an equitable change in a school system.

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### Deficit Mindset

*Our school caters to children from poor socio-economic backgrounds. Except for a very few, rest are not able to learn or do well academically.”*

*- School Head A*

*Do you agree with the above statement? Let us see what does research say on this?*

Researches examining the beliefs of school heads and teachers have found out that many hold on to ‘deficit’ views regarding students, especially those who are low-achievers. By deficit views it is implied that many school functionaries feel that these are children who are “lacking in something” and thus cannot do well academically (Batra, 2017). The most prominent reason attributed to the belief that low-achievers ‘lack in something’ is because of their family or cultural background. Other reasons often voiced are: such children are less capable of learning, either because poor children are less intelligent, have bad habits or adverse home environments (Brinkmann, 2015). Such beliefs associate the causes of failure with the student rather than believe that the school is ill-equipped to respond to needs of these children. Once certain students are labelled as low-achievers, teachers expect lower academic performance from them ---contrary to working along with them to improve their learning levels (Skrla and Scheurich 2003, 2004a, 2004b). However, the very same researches have put forward the view that not a

‘few’ but “all” children are equally capable of learning. In an extensive research carried out in some of the schools of the best-performing districts in USA, it was found that the drive for improving learning standards had by default improved the performance of all students, even those who were considered as academically weak. Even in India, a study by Batra (2017) found that teachers who were trained in constructivist pedagogies of teaching, carefully studied the learning needs of students and modified their transactional strategies responding to needs of ‘slow learners’; as a result, all children were able to learn. Can we make this a reality in our school?

## Equity Perspective

*Not few but ALL children are capable of learning  
and performing better*

“

*“She is a “dull” child as her parents are daily wage labourers and are not able to support her learning at home”*

*- Teacher X*

*Do you agree with the above statement? Let us see what does research say on this?*

## Deficit Mindset

In a study of elementary schools in Delhi, Namrata (2012) examined teachers’ prejudices and discriminatory classroom practices towards marginalised children. The findings revealed that children who were considered as performing “well” by teachers were usually seated in the front rows, did sundry small work for teachers and were often called



upon to answer questions in the class. On the other hand, children who were described by the teacher as ‘dull’ or poor in studies and less likely to complete basic education, were seated at the back and were rarely asked questions within the classroom. The study concluded that such kind of practices eventually led children to dislike school and drop out. Almost similar findings were documented by Nambissan (1996) regarding students belonging to disadvantaged sections. These practices are prevalent in schools that surround us and may be a reality of our school as well. Yes, parents not supporting learning at home can be challenging for schools. But there are many ways of involving parents into the learning graph of students, even those parents who are uneducated. This will require extra effort on the part of school heads and teachers to reach out to such parents and open regular channels of communication with them. A study conducted by Ingram et. al. (2007) found that strategies of parenting and learning at home were found to be highly effective in the context of children belonging to minority or low-income populations. As part of parenting, the school built close relations with parents and asked them to involve themselves in simple ways, such as, dropping the child to school in the morning, praising a child for schoolwork, talking and sharing stories with the child, overseeing that the child spent time on studying and creating a space at home where books were kept neatly. Over time, this had an impact on student achievement. The other aspect of learning at home, included practices such as taking the children to places of interest, museums or libraries, bringing learning materials at home, talking to teachers about expectations of completing school work, working with children on various reading, writing and number skills etc. With parents who are uneducated, practices for learning at home could be taking out time to talk to children about their occupation, asking them about the homework, encouraging children to tell them about what they learnt in school and being in regular touch with teachers.

## Equity Perspective

*Teachers and parents together can develop the learning graph of a child, no child is “dull.”*



### Exercise 2

#### Reflect and Write

- (a) As a school leader, reflect on your life as a student. Can you recall any event (s) when you were at the receiving end of a deficit mindset by an adult or a peer? Write about that event (s).
1. How did you feel during the event?
  2. What did you think of the adult or the peer who exhibited a deficit mindset on your abilities?
  3. How did you wish the adult or peer had responded to you back then?
  4. What do you think of that event now?
  5. What are your learnings from that event? Did it change the way you respond to students today when you are a school leader?

#### Reflect and Write

- (b) As a school leader, reflect critically on your thoughts and behaviours.
1. Is there a mindset that you believe to be correct but may not be equitable?
  2. Write and evaluate it against the notion of equity
  3. In what ways you can reframe your thoughts so that it is equitable?

4. What action steps will you take to transact this reframed perspective in school processes?

### Let us sum up

The above two examples highlight the common beliefs of school heads and teachers in many schools. As we saw, these beliefs are inequitable. In the literature on equity, the most important equity premise is the fact that all children are capable of learning and performing better. The cause of 'weak' (ness) does not lie in the student, rather the school is unable to cope with learning needs of children who are termed as 'slow' learners. It is true that some students may be academically behind. In such cases, the role of school leaders and teacher leaders becomes critical to make school and classrooms inclusive, with a focus on learning graph of each student. The school must reach out to parents and the community at large in order to take their support and bridge learning gaps of children.





## SECTION 3

### PERSPECTIVE SHIFT FOR AN EQUITY MINDSET IN A SCHOOL (CONTINUED)

**Learning Objective:** Help school leaders gain a perspective shift for developing an equity mindset in school

**Key Words:** Equity; Perspective; Mindset; Attitudes; School

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## Deficit Mindset

*I give higher order thinking tasks to “bright” students because “weak” ones will be unable to understand”*

*- Teacher Y*

*Do you agree with the above statement? Let us see what does research say on this?*

Often it is found that students are labelled as ‘weak’ and ‘bright,’ leading to neglect of weak students by teachers. This neglect takes various shapes, from discriminatory behaviour to assigning lower order thinking tasks to low-achievers or ‘slow’/‘weak’ students. This becomes a vicious cycle as academically weaker students get further neglected, leading to poor levels of performance; hence, their lower participation in classroom and in the school. Boaler (2002) found that teachers discriminated between students belonging to the working class backgrounds and others. They used traditional methods of teaching for weaker students and gave them lower-order thinking tasks. Hence, the curriculum was not transacted equally for all children. As part of action research, he attempted to teach mathematics by assigning higher order thinking tasks to all students and found that it was understandable by all, even though it required additional effort towards low-achievers. Based on strong evidences, Lotan (2006) also argued that all students in a classroom must access a rigorous and an academically challenging curriculum. Furthermore, school heads and teachers needed to create conducive conditions for students to have positive interactions with teachers and their peers in order for them to have “balanced” and “equal-status” participation inside the classrooms, rather than discriminating between ‘weak’ and ‘bright’ students.

## Equity Perspective

*Teachers need to believe that all children can learn, they must assign higher order thinking tasks to even those who are slow learners to improve their self-confidence and make classroom more inclusive*

“

*We discourage girls to take up mathematics as they are unable to devote much time to practice at home; girls usually take up arts or drawing.”*

*- School Head Z*

*Do you agree with the above statement? Let us see what does research say on this?*

Have you encountered this belief system among teachers or school heads you know? Are their state policies in secondary education where mathematics can be taken as an optional subject? While we may know that some children have an aptitude for mathematics and science, and others do not have it, discouraging girls for taking up mathematics can be a result of an inequitable belief system. According to some researches, this belief emerged from the notion that mathematics was considered as a superior discipline reserved for boys and considered less useful for girls. Kaeley (1995) stated that cultural norms of societies gave rise to existing disparities in participation of girls in mathematics. This was a case with many developed countries too, where the enrolment of girls became less as soon as the subject of mathematics became optional. Though many believed that gender differences in participation and achievement in mathematics had biological roots, researchers pointed these differences to an interaction of socio-cultural factors, expectations

of the society, and personal belief systems (Kaiser and Rogers, 1995). There are many socio-cultural factors operating behind this stereotype. But as we have said often, the school has an important role to play in breaking stereotypes, and one needs to examine if this discrimination happens within the four walls of the school or classroom. Research also says that the reasons for girls not taking up mathematics could be a result of teachers' behaviour such as the absence of active listening by the teacher, preferring to answer questions raised by boys, teachers not linking concepts with everyday life experiences, the absence of a classroom environment that instils positive self-concept in girl students or the absence of a space to make mistakes and take risks without the fear of answering in right or wrong. As a school leader one needs to examine our own mindset and practices as well as those of our teachers to see if this is a practice in the school?

### Equity Perspective

*Girls must be actively encouraged to take up mathematics as gender does not determine intelligence.*

“

#### Deficit Mindset

*We have to create ability-based sections in higher classes. We know “dull” children will not give the school a higher success rate. Also, we assign more experienced and qualified teachers to children with higher potential and IQ as they assure us results.”*

*- School Head B*

*Do you agree with the above statement? Let us see what does research say on this?*



Provision of qualified and trained teachers to all students as measures to enhance equity is considered important. This is also essential if we want to provide equitable learning opportunities to all children. It becomes the responsibility of the school leader and teachers to improve classroom interactions through equitable practices and bridge the gaps in achievement between students. It is believed that teachers' mastery of knowledge and teaching is the most important factor for students' achievement; hence discriminating between students by providing a few high achievers your best teachers and deputing less experienced teachers for slow learners can further widen the learning gap between students. You may say that not providing experienced teachers to high achievers can also be discriminatory. In fact, 'high achievers' are also considered as an equity group, who may have special learning needs. Instead of creating ability-based classrooms, it would be more equitable if you could orient your teachers to teach in mixed ability classrooms, where all students have access to high quality teachers. This practice can bring equitable participation and influence student achievement (Batra, 2017; Brinkmann, 2015; Lindsey, 2012). Teachers with their professional expertise can cater to individual learning differences in a mixed ability classroom. As we have seen earlier, higher expectations from each student can lead to better performance from all, even from those who are low-achievers.

### Equity Perspective

*Students who are low achievers need qualified and trained teachers as much as those who are high achievers; a school's performance is dependent on each student's performance.*



### Exercise 3

During school supervision, informal and formal conversations with teachers, parents and students, do you come across ‘deficit’ mindsets?

It will be a useful exercise to keep a note on the deficit mindsets and converse with teachers, parents or students enable them to question their own beliefs. Encourage them to self-reflect and reframe their beliefs into ‘equity’ beliefs. However, it is not enough to help them reframe but also support them in bringing the newly framed equity beliefs in to operation and practice. In due course of time, these efforts will help in creating an equitable school culture.

### Let us sum up

In this section, we examined three inequitable beliefs critically. It has been agreed that equitable opportunities implies that same curriculum must be accessible by all. Teachers need to assign higher order thinking tasks to all students and not just to high achievers. Similarly, there must not be any discrimination based on gender and subjects (taken up by different gender groups) as once again, equity calls for equal access to any form of knowledge. Lastly, it is regarded that qualified and experienced teachers are as important for slow achievers as for high achievers. Hence, teaching must be encouraged in mixed-ability classrooms where there is equal status participation among learners and students stand to benefit from peer interactions. This ensures learning for all.

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## **Additional Readings**

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## Assessment: Multiple Choice Questions (MCQs)

- Q1. How are the concepts of equity and equality related?
- Equity refers to sameness and equality refers to fairness and justice.
  - Equity is a subset of equality.
  - Equality and equity both refer to equal opportunity.
  - Equality is the sameness component of equity.
- Q2. Equity refers to provisions of:
- Equal opportunity, need-based opportunity and fair treatment.
  - Fairness and justice.
  - Equal opportunity.
  - Need-based support and fair treatment
- Q3. Which of these is true?
- Only a few children are capable of learning.
  - A school's performance is dependent on bright children.
  - All children are capable of learning.
  - A few children who are weak always remain behind.
- Q4. Access to qualified and experienced teachers
- Is important for slow learners.
  - Is reserved for a few students.
  - Enhances the potential of bright students.
  - Improves the learning potential of all children.

Q5. Which of these is true?

- a. Slow achievers must be taught lower order thinking skills through an academic year.
- b. Higher order thinking tasks must be done by all students even if each one learns at his/his own pace.
- c. Higher order thinking tasks must be allotted to students who are brighter.
- d. Low achievers always perform poor.

Ans: Q1.-d, Q2.-a, Q3.-c, Q4.-d, Q5.-b













## Modules in this Series

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### *List of Contributors*

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