

## Equity in practice: school leaders' perspectives in Scotland and South Australia

Caitlin Senior, Pasi Sahlberg and Glenn C. Savage

Faculty of Education, University of Melbourne, Melbourne, Australia

### ABSTRACT

Education systems worldwide position equity as a central policy objective, yet its advancement depends heavily on school-level interpretation and enactment. This article examines how school leaders understand and operationalise equity within the constraints and opportunities of their policy environments. Drawing on qualitative interview data collected in Scotland and South Australia, the study finds that despite differing policy architectures, school leaders across both systems conceptualise equity as a dynamic, context-responsive commitment to meeting diverse student needs rather than a fixed or standardised principle. This fluid understanding enables leaders to navigate limited or inconsistently allocated system resources by exercising professional judgement to prioritise support for students' different needs. However, the variability in both conceptions and enactments of equity highlights a misalignment between system-level policy intentions and school-level realities. The study identifies three structural conditions: definitional ambiguity, resource inadequacy, and metric misalignment, that help explain persistent gaps between system-level equity intentions and school-level realities. The article argues that more coherent, shared frameworks for defining, measuring, and monitoring equity across system and school levels that align with the complex realities of school life could strengthen the capacity of education systems to advance equity in more meaningful and sustainable ways.

### KEYWORDS

Equity; educational leadership; school education; policy enactment

## Introduction

Education systems around the world have increasingly prioritised equity in education as a core policy aim, in part due to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD's) position that the highest performing education systems are those that combine high-equity and high-quality (Senior and Sahlberg 2025). Although equity in education is frequently referred

to in policy documents, there is no universally agreed definition of what equity means or what it looks like in school practices (Appels et al. 2023; Cairney and Kippin, 2022; Edgar, 2022; Harris and Jones 2019; Levinson, Geron, and Brighthouse 2022; Lingard, Sellar, and Savage 2014).

Ideas about what equity in education means and how it can be better addressed have evolved alongside advancing research, changes in society, and shifting ideas about the purpose of school education, amongst other factors. A widely held view is that an equitable education system is one in which disparities in student outcomes are not unjustly patterned by factors such as socioeconomic status, geographic location, gender, ethnicity, or disability. While no system has fully realised that vision, some systems and schools have made more progress than others (Adamson, Åstrand, and Darling-Hammond 2016; Downey and Condrón 2016; Jennings et al. 2015; Sahlberg 2023; Senior 2021; Wilson and Fergus 1988). Harris and Jones (2019, 391) suggest ‘moving away from the language of policy to the reality of making it (equity in education) happen means looking far more closely at the work of those who lead in schools.’ However, long-standing research continues to show that out-of-school factors largely relating to a child’s socioeconomic background and community contexts remain the most powerful explainer of variability in student achievement in school, with children from traditionally less advantaged socioeconomic backgrounds generally achieving lower outcomes than their more traditionally socioeconomically advantaged peers (Alexander and Morgan 2016; Coleman 1966). The 2022 PISA (OECD 2023) data show that in OECD countries advantaged students (top 25% socio-economic status) scored about 93 points higher than disadvantaged students (bottom 25%) in mathematics that is equal to over three years of schooling.

Within this context, school leadership can play a key role within schools to influence more equitable student outcomes (Grissom, Egalite, and Lindsay 2021). As Hart, DeMatthews, and Gümüş (2025, 1) note, school leaders ‘are crucial in establishing equitable and impactful schools that meet the diverse needs of all students.’ It is school leaders who, as Molla and Gale (2019, 858) put it, ‘use policy as an opportunity to advance what they think is achievable within the limits of available resources’ regarding equity in education. Yet, although a growing body of literature examines leadership for equity and/or related concepts, much of it remains either largely theoretical or focused on particular student groups or specific interventions (e.g. Berkovich and Eyal 2021; Keddie 2015; Scanlan and López 2012; Tippet et al. 2024).

Despite this attention, there is limited empirical research on how school leaders understand, interpret, and enact system-level equity policies in their everyday work. One example is Savage’s (2013) study of how equity was understood in two different Australian schools, which illustrated that what equity means and how that meaning is enacted is mediated within specific school contexts, (that study, however, did not focus particularly on school leaders). Another

study (Ainscow and Chapman 2025) that was conducted in the City of Dundee in Scotland focused on developing cultures that embrace innovation and school leadership through working together and employing inquiry-based approaches to the development of practice. One of the main findings in that study was that schools need to be supported to make meaning within local contexts about equity before they can change practice. This means that the communities of practice within and between schools ‘may well negotiate local meanings for those agendas that are different from those of the formulators themselves or, indeed, of other local schools’ (Ainscow and Chapman 2025, 391).

These and other studies (e.g. Ainscow 2015; Dunham 2025) highlight an important issue regarding school level enactment of equity policies: a lack of a commonly understood and operationalisable definition of the term. Our ongoing study that this paper is part of, also identifies a lack of common understanding of equity in education at the system level (Senior 2026). Yet less well understood is whether the challenges school leaders face in enacting equity are specific to particular policy contexts or reflect more general patterns in how equity policies travel from system to school. This article addresses these dynamics by examining how school leaders conceptualise equity and how they perceive, translate, and enact system-level equity policies. We use qualitative data collected from Scotland and South Australia: two systems that have placed equity at the centre of their education improvement and reform agendas. Our examination offers three key insights. First, we show that cross-system convergence, rather than difference, characterises how equity is understood and enacted at the school level. Despite their different policy architectures, leaders in both Scotland and South Australia describe strikingly similar experiences. Second, we extend policy enactment scholarship by demonstrating how equity functions less as a policy to be implemented and more as a professional orientation that leaders must continually construct within conditions of resource scarcity. Third, we identify specific structural conditions: definitional ambiguity, resource inadequacy, and metric misalignment, that help explain why equity-oriented reforms so consistently stall at the school level, regardless of system design.

### **Policy enactment and leadership for equity**

Unequal schooling outcomes among different student groups and what is causing them has been systematically researched since the 1960s. School effectiveness research since the 1970s has also highlighted leadership as a key factor affecting school effectiveness and school improvement (Edmunds 1982; Huber and West 2002). More recently, global scholarship on school leadership has focused on social justice, moral, ethical, and culturally responsive orientations in education development (e.g. Ehrich et al. 2015; Hart, DeMatthews, and Gümüş 2025; Khalifa, Gooden, and Davis 2016). This literature positions equity

not only as an outcome but as a guiding principle for leadership practice in diverse, and complex school and system contexts (e.g. Courtney, McGinity, and Gunter 2018; Ward et al. 2015).

However, school leaders do not operate in a vacuum. Their efforts to promote equity are shaped by system-level policies and structures, particularly accountability mechanisms and resource allocations. School leaders must interpret these policies and determine how to enact them within the constraints and possibilities of their school contexts. This process is often described as policy enactment (Ball, Maguire, and Braun 2011; Orchard, Hickey, and Riddle 2025; Singh, Thomas, and Harris 2013). As Dadvand (2024, 1242) describes:

policy enactment is a contested process and requires decision-making that involves receiving, making sense of, translating, and narrating what policy stipulates. Policy ideas and expectations are rarely taken up as intended, and their implementation becomes conditional upon the resources and opportunities within schools.

From this enactment perspective, school leaders are not merely implementers of policy but active policy actors whose professional judgement shapes how system-level intentions are realised (or not) in practice. Accordingly, earlier studies show that equity policies are enacted differently across schools depending on local contexts, community values, and leaders' interpretations (Andreasson, Ohlsson, and Assarson 2015; McKay 2018; Riddle and Cleaver 2015; Savage 2013). Work by scholars such as Rezai-Rashti and Singh further demonstrates that leadership enactment is contingent, negotiated, and deeply contextual (e.g. Rezai-Rashti, Segeren, and Abdmolaei 2024; Singh, Thomas, and Harris 2013), with other scholars pointing out that system level policies can overlook the importance of school level contextualisation (e.g. Hickey et al. 2022). These findings underscore a key insight: understanding equity in education requires attending not only to policy design but to the interpretive work through which leaders translate policy into practice.

A complementary strand of empirical research identifies leadership practices associated with more equitable outcomes (Day, Gu, and Sammons 2016; Leithwood 2021; Shields 2010). Four key insights from this existing research are particularly relevant to this study. First, school leaders play a decisive role in translating equity policy into instructional improvement. Across OECD analyses and the wider leadership literature, equity-oriented policies achieve their intended effects only when leaders convert them into concrete changes in classroom practice (Leithwood, Harris, & Hopkins, 2019; OECD, 2016; 2025). This includes prioritising high-quality teaching, targeting learning support to students experiencing disadvantage, and using evidence to monitor progress over time. Studies from Scotland's Scottish Attainment Challenge and Australia's post-Gonski reform agenda illustrate that autonomy and targeted funding alone do not reduce inequities; rather, it is leaders' capacity to align resources, professional learning, and instructional focus that determines

impact (Australian Government, 2018; Scottish Government, 2022). In enactment terms, this suggests that equity policy is not self-executing: it requires active translation by leaders who must make judgements about how to convert policy intentions into instructional realities.

Second, the successful enactment of equity policies depends on distributed leadership and collaborative cultures rather than individual leadership capacity. Research consistently shows that leadership for equity is collective work within and between schools in education systems. Leaders who build collaborative cultures, strengthen middle leadership, and foster professional learning communities are better able to ensure that equity-oriented practices reach all classrooms (Grissom, Egalite, and Lindsay 2021; Hargreaves and O'Connor, 2018; Harris, 2004). OECD TALIS findings highlight strong associations between distributed leadership, teacher collaboration, and positive professional climates that are conditions that are particularly important in schools serving diverse and high-need communities (OECD 2019; OECD 2025). In Scotland, evidence from the School Improvement Partnership Programme indicated that schools can be more effective when headteachers mobilise shared responsibility and professional judgement, supported by networks across schools and local authorities (Chapman et al. 2016). A recent study of headteacher utilisation of funding to improve student outcomes in Scotland concluded that increasing the capacity of networks at the local and national level could support improved application of funds (Firth, Beck, and Wilson 2025). Australian research (Goode, Drysdale, and Gurr 2023; Hardy 2015; Vaughan, Anderson, and McClenaghan 2026) similarly emphasises that leaders' interpretive work (i.e. how they make sense of policy in context) can benefit from collective expertise and staff trust.

Third, the impact of school leadership on equity is strongly shaped by system conditions, including coherence of policy priorities, adequacy of support, and capacity at the middle leadership tier. OECD implementation research stresses that policy design must be matched with attention to delivery conditions. Where systems devolve responsibility without sufficient guidance, resourcing, or professional learning, school leaders often respond with compliance-oriented behaviours that undermine equity goals. Enactment research characterises this as situated implementation shaped by the surrounding governance and support infrastructure. Across different contexts, policy coherence is not an intrinsic feature of reforms but something leaders and staff must actively construct from often complex and competing conceptions and practical interpretations. Research shows that principals influence whether teachers interpret equity-oriented initiatives as learning-focused improvement or as episodic compliance, by shaping access to ideas, structuring professional dialogues, and creating conditions for teacher learning (Coburn 2005; Spillane, Reiser, and Reimer 2002). Classic implementation studies (e.g. McLaughlin 1987) further underscore that local enactment depends on school leader agency and on whether policy design is matched with usable support and learning

opportunities. When these are absent, school leaders often adopt coping strategies that prioritise compliance and risk minimisation over deep instructional change. Recent international education system research argues that strengthening the middle leaders' data literacy, professional support, and improvement capacity is a core lever for improving outcomes at scale.

Fourth is the role of accountability. External accountability regimes can either enable equity improvement or generate fragmentation as comparative research on school inspections reveals cross-national 'side effects', such as strategic behaviour, narrowing curricula, stress, and short-termism, while accountability literature reviews show how high-stakes incentives can encourage triage and uneven attention to student groups (Ehren, Jones, and Perryman 2016; Fahey and Köster 2019; Torres 2021). From an enactment perspective, accountability frameworks do not simply measure equity outcomes, they actively shape what equity can become in practice, by signalling which outcomes matter and which remain invisible.

Taken together, the available evidence suggests that school leaders can be pivotal actors in advancing equity, but their impact depends on both professional capability and enabling system conditions. Policies aimed at improving quality and equity are most likely to succeed when leaders are supported to focus on instructional improvement, cultivate distributed, collaborative expertise, and operate within coherent systems that prioritise learning over compliance. Yet what remains less clear is whether the challenges leaders face in enacting equity are specific to particular policy contexts or reflect more general patterns. In what follows, we address that question by comparing leaders' experiences across two distinct systems.

## Methods

This study utilises a comparative case study and qualitative approach to examine how school leaders understand and enact equity across two distinct yet comparable policy contexts: Scotland and South Australia. Comparative case-oriented approaches are regularly used to enhance understandings of educational policy and practice (e.g. Arnove 2009; Crossley and Vulliamy 1984; Rivas 2023; Volckmar 2018). According to Wiseman and colleagues (2025 p. 5) 'the evaluation of education policy can be both reflected and instructed by comparative education, elaborating or analysing implicit and explicit criteria for evaluation.' For the purpose of this study, Scotland and South Australia were chosen as the comparative case studies because both systems are explicitly prioritising equity in education for system improvement, yet advancing equity in education remains a challenge in both places. That disconnect between policy aims and realities suggests better understanding or 'reflection' of equity policy enactment in both places could provide fresh insights regarding how equity related policy and practice could be improved particularly in

Scotland and South Australia. They both are English-speaking OECD countries with inherited characteristics and cultures from the British education traditions, yet they differ in governance arrangements, funding mechanisms, and accountability structures. Those similarities and differences between Scotland and South Australia make them ideal cases for comparison. We chose a qualitative case study approach for 'its ability to investigate complex social phenomena' (like equity in education and policy enactment) (Glette and Wiig 2022, 1377). By comparing leaders' experiences across these contexts, we aim to distinguish between challenges arising from specific policy designs and those that may be more structural, thereby generating findings with relevance beyond either single system, in line with a case study approach (e.g. Eisenhardt and Graebner 2007; Gerring and Cojocar 2016; Harland 2014). We next detail the school leadership and equity context in each system, and then proceed with the methods.

### *School leadership and equity context in Scotland*

The Scottish education system has developed over time, while maintaining an ethos from the eighteenth-century 'Scottish Enlightenment' (Bryce et al. 2018). Though part of the United Kingdom, since devolution in 1999, Scotland's own government has legislative responsibility for education (as well as health and other public services). Most children attend public schools administered by one of the 32 local authorities. As such, 'the Scottish education system is different from other parts of the United Kingdom, particularly England' (Chapman et al. 2018, 13). Within this governance structure, equity and excellence are articulated as the main overarching aims for Scottish education, as set out in the National Improvement Framework (NIF).

The Scottish Government has invited the OECD to review its education system three times, in 2007, 2015 and 2021. Each review has highlighted positive aspects of the system, as well as areas for improvement, including better addressing equity in education, particularly to improve outcomes for children 'from the most deprived areas' (OECD 2015, 69). Equity has become increasingly defined through a policy focus on reducing disparities in educational outcomes linked to socioeconomic disadvantage, particularly those associated with child poverty, regularly referred to in Scotland as the poverty-related attainment gap (PRAG) (e.g. Sosu and Ellis 2014). As Firth, Beck, and Wilson (2025, 2) put it:

This poverty-related attainment gap and associated concerns about rising levels of child poverty have become powerful drivers of education reform in Scotland, with a plethora of policies and interventions being developed to tackle it.

A main policy response to the poverty-related attainment gap has been the Scottish Attainment Challenge (SAC), initiated in 2015.

The SAC operates through various funding streams, most notably Pupil Equity Funding (PEF). Uniquely, PEF directly provides headteachers with



‘additional’ funding to address the PRAG based on the number of pupils registered for free meals in their school. Headteachers have discretion over how PEF is used, reflecting a policy idea that school leaders are best placed to decide how to utilise funding to address the PRAG within their context. SAC and PEF continue to date. Since its introduction in 2017, the ‘additionality’ of PEF funding has been questioned, for example, the current Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills of Scotland expressed concern that SAC funding ‘is too often being used to plug gaps in non-education services that have arisen due to budget cuts’ (Seith 2025).

As part of the ‘school empowerment’ reform agenda that started in 2017, the trend of focusing on the role of headteacher to close the PRAG continues (Donaldson 2010; Scottish Government 2019). This ‘empowerment agenda’ has been ‘criticised for placing more responsibility and accountability on the shoulders of headteachers rather than truly empower them’ (Harvie, Robertson, and Brack 2024, 2). Scottish Government programs like *Into Headship* aim to help develop aspiring headteachers’ leadership capacity and expertise (Education Scotland 2026).

Based on the recent OECD review, Scotland is reorganising its education system inspections and qualifications structures that largely adhere to traditional accountability frameworks particularly in senior secondary school (e.g. exams), despite a more holistically focused comprehensive curriculum (the *Curriculum for Excellence*). Recent reviews instigated by the Scottish Government as well as findings from academic research have suggested that Scotland’s traditional qualifications structures have stifled equity efforts (e.g. Hayward 2023) and put ‘performative’ pressure particularly on headteachers (Cook 2015).

### *School leadership and equity context in South Australia*

The South Australian education system has a history of ‘prioritising social justice’ (Collins and Yates 2009, 125). However, like in the rest of Australia, European arrival in South Australia dispossessed and disenfranchised local Indigenous populations, which has created suffering and inequities that persist to date. Though the Government of South Australia has responsibility for public education, over the past several decades, the Federal government has become more involved in steering education policies and initiatives. The Education Revolution in the late 2000s and early 2010s pursued under the Rudd–Gillard governments marked a significant shift towards national coordination, introducing a national curriculum, national school leadership standards, and a national assessment and accountability framework (National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy, administered to Australian students in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 (NAPLAN)). Equity is a main national aim for Australian education, as per the 2019 *Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration* and the *Better and Fairer Schools Agreement* (2025–2034), both as signed by all Australian states and territories.



Unlike in Scotland where most children attend public schools, one third of Australian children attend private school. The Federal government provides the majority public funding for private (non-government) schools and states provide the majority public funding for public schools (government schools) (Sinclair and Brooks 2024). All schools are expected to be funded according to the schooling resource standard (SRS), which is 'an estimate of how much total public funding a school needs to meet its students' educational needs' (Australian Government n.d.). However, public (government schools) that increasingly comprise higher concentrations of more socioeconomically disadvantaged students continue to be underfunded according to the SRS (Sahlberg and Cobbold 2025). That underfunding means the children with the most need who would most benefit from adequate and increased school funding are being systematically additionally disadvantaged (Cobbold 2025; Kenway and Boden 2025). Equity has become increasingly articulated in Australian education policies as the SRS funding allocations for certain categories of students as well as the differences in outcomes (namely NAPLAN results) between different student groups (e.g. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, and students from more regional and remote areas compared to students from metro areas) (Di Gregorio, Mulcahy, and Gerrard 2025).

Similar to the empowerment agenda in Scotland, school autonomy has been pushed in varied ways in Australia as an education improvement initiative with 'mixed effects' regarding equity (Keddie and Holloway 2020, 289). The mixed effects are associated with the corresponding high levels of centralised accountability and compliance, resulting in the paradoxical task of a school principal in Australia having to navigate 'performative priorities (e.g. improving NAPLAN results) with equitable practices' (Dadvand 2024, 1247; Goode, Drysdale, and Gurr 2023). A recent report on principals' practice based on 50 interviews with public school principals in South Australia found 'in a marketised school environment, principals are increasingly concerned about reputational risks, unfavourable conditions of school choice and competition and the negative impacts of data-led comparisons' as well as 'principals describe a significant challenge in navigating outside policy demands and claim these demands often impede their ability to address the unique needs of their local communities' (Dolan et al. 2024, 15).

Recently, the Government of South Australia has developed *Our strategy for public education in South Australia* that includes equity as a main 'area of impact' for education to 'unlock every child's potential now and in the future' (Government of South Australia Department for Education 2023). Unlike previous strategies (see Mader 2024), the intention of the new South Australian strategy is to broaden ideas about equity and system improvement to focus more on collaboration, wellbeing, and agency for all in the system, including principals (Fullan 2025).

## *Participants and data collection*

Qualitative data were collected in 2024 and 2025 from 22 current public school leaders – 11 headteachers in Scotland and 11 principals in South Australia, using a combination of focus groups and semi-structured interviews. Participants were purposefully selected to represent primary, secondary, and comprehensive schools across both rural and urban settings. All were experienced leaders able to reflect on equity policy and practice over time.

Focus groups and interviews were conducted virtually, lasting approximately one hour each, and focused on leaders' understandings of equity, their experiences of relevant policies, and their practices in translating system-level expectations into school-level action. All sessions were audio-recorded and transcribed. Consent was obtained under conditions of anonymity; pseudonyms beginning with 'A' indicate South Australian participants while those beginning with 'S' indicate Scottish participants. Ethical approval was granted by the Human Research Ethics Committee at the University of Melbourne in 2024.

## *Data analysis*

Transcripts were analysed using interpretive and thematic analysis in NVivo (Braun and Clarke 2006; Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2015). Our analysis focused on identifying patterns and themes that emerged regarding how leaders conceptualised equity, the challenges they described in enacting equity-oriented policies, and the conditions they identified as enabling or constraining their work. Given the comparative design, we attended particularly to convergences and divergences across the two systems.

The findings that follow are organised around three perspectives that emerged from the data analysis consistently across both contexts. Limitations of this study include the use of a respondent sample that is not fully representative, data that capture particular points in time, and the possibility that participants' responses were shaped by professional considerations.

## *Findings*

What follows are three main findings from the empirical data collected as outlined above from school leaders in Scotland and South Australia. Due to the trend of equity policy enactment gaps globally, and specifically in Scotland and South Australia, we chose to focus this article on these specific findings with the hope that they might be helpful for education system policymakers and leaders to consider regarding aims to enhance equity in education.

### *Perspective 1: equity is a dynamic and contextual concept*

School leaders in this study consistently conceptualised equity not as a fixed or uniform principle, but as a dynamic, context-responsive commitment to

meeting diverse and changing student needs. Notably, this fluid understanding was shared across both systems. Despite differences in policy architecture, leaders in Scotland and South Australia described equity in strikingly similar terms, as something that must be continually interpreted and enacted in response to students' circumstances, school contexts, and wider social conditions. As Alex in South Australia explained, 'if you want me to tell you exactly what my view of equity is, I can't because it changes on a daily basis, based on what I read, what I hear.'

This emphasis on change over time was echoed across focus groups and interviews. For example, South Australian secondary school principal Anne similarly noted that 'equity needs of a student can change from day to day, week to week, month to month,' underscoring the temporal and situational nature of equity work. For most school leaders in Scotland and South Australia, equity was therefore not something to be achieved once, but an ongoing process of judgement and adjustment embedded in everyday school leadership practice.

Consistent with this understanding, school leaders described equity as central to their professional role rather than as an additional or peripheral responsibility. Scottish secondary school headteacher Seth was particularly explicit about the immediacy and intensity of this work, stating that 'it is our daily role now,' before detailing how equity considerations begin 'from the minute a young person walks in (to the school)' including ensuring students are fed, clothed, cared for, and safe.

While school leaders in Scotland and South Australia shared a common view of equity as dynamic and essential, what equity looked like in practice varied considerably in line with how the concept was conceived. They described responding to students' holistic needs in ways that extended well beyond traditional academic attainment, ranging from increasing access to post-school pathways to addressing basic material needs and supporting wellbeing. School leaders in both countries emphasised differentiated support and multiple pathways to success, with Amelia, a primary school principal in regional South Australia, describing equity as education 'moving away from a one size fits all model' to create 'multiple opportunities to be successful in multiple different ways.'

School leaders in both locations also highlighted the layered and multifaceted nature of equity work. South Australian primary school principal Aubrey characterised equity as 'quite layered and there's a lot of levels to it,' encompassing access, differentiation, financial adjustments, and support not only for students but also for staff. Similarly, in Scotland, Stephanie, a headteacher at an urban/semi-rural primary school, described equity as 'trying to give each child not necessarily the same experience, but what each child requires,' while a Scottish headteacher at an urban high school, Sylvia, emphasised removing barriers and maintaining 'expectations of every child ... for the highest possible outcomes.'

Importantly, principals were acutely aware that students' equity needs were shaped by factors beyond the school gate. Several school leaders located inequity within broader social, economic, and system-level conditions. Scott, head teacher at an urban secondary school in Scotland, described inequity as 'pervasive across society ... beyond school, housing ... communities, cities,' emphasising that while education systems must try to mitigate these effects, they operate alongside other systems that also shape young people's lives. Sarah, head teacher of an urban/semi-rural primary school in Scotland, extended this point by highlighting how schools often become the first point of contact for addressing children's complex social issues within highly localised contexts of generational deprivation and affluence, noting that 'a lot of this (starting to address children's complex issues) starts at school level,' even though schools cannot address these challenges alone.

This finding highlights that school leaders in both Scotland and South Australia understood equity similarly as fluid, multifaceted, and deeply contextual, requiring constant professional judgement rather than technical compliance. Importantly, this convergence occurred across two quite different policy contexts, suggesting that the dynamic, enacted character of equity work may be a general feature of how equity policies function at the school level, rather than a response to particular policy designs. From an enactment perspective (Ball, Maguire, and Braun 2011), equity emerges here as something leaders must continually construct rather than simply implement, a finding that complicates linear models of policy-to-practice translation. This dynamic conception enabled school leaders to prioritise support in response to shifting student needs and constrained system resources. However, as explored in the next finding, this reliance on professional judgement also intensified tensions for leaders operating within inadequately allocated resources, revealing that professional judgement, however sophisticated, cannot compensate for structural constraints.

### ***Perspective 2: growing challenges with diversifying student needs and inadequate resources***

While Perspective 1 establishes that equity is understood as dynamic and enacted through professional judgement, Perspective 2 reveals the conditions under which that enactment occurs: namely, conditions of scarcity. In both Scotland and South Australia school leaders in this study consistently described significant difficulty enacting their understanding of equity (as outlined above) in practice due to constrained resources and increasingly complex student needs. When asked about how they translated system-level equity policies into school practice, school leaders overwhelmingly framed their role and practices in terms of difficult resourcing decisions. As Anne succinctly put it, the central challenge comes down to 'how do we then think about our resources and ensuring you know that we're addressing equity.'

For most school leaders, system-level equity policy was considered at the school level and in leadership practice primarily through targeted funding streams, accountability requirements, and short-term initiatives, which then had to be translated into local decisions about money, staffing, and time. Equity, in practice, became a principle driven by allocating inadequate resources as strategically and ethically as possible. As Alfred in South Australia explained, 'you just got to use the funding that you get to put it where it's most needed,' even as leaders recognised that this often meant doing 'more with less.' In Scotland, Scott similarly captured this tension, noting that 'getting the right resource in the right places is a very difficult thing to do,' particularly in contexts where needs were intensifying faster than support. In both countries school leaders, therefore, experienced equity work in practice less as the implementation of clear policy and more as a continual process of moral and professional judgement about who and what could be prioritised under resourcing conditions of scarcity, a struggle that shaped their daily leadership practice.

PEF featured prominently in Scottish school leaders' accounts of how system-level equity policy is considered and enacted at the school level, described as both essential and increasingly insufficient. For example, Simone, head teacher at an urban primary school, characterised PEF as 'invaluable in terms of being able to augment what we can provide in school,' but emphasised that its use required significant reflection and judgement, noting that it was not a simple matter of dividing funds evenly among eligible students. Similarly, Stephanie explained that while PEF was initially understood as 'an additional, it was an extra,' it was now increasingly required 'to plug gaps here and there' as core budgets declined. Sylvia (head teacher at an urban secondary school), reinforced this point, describing a context in which 'cuts are impinging heavily, and there is no answer to that,' with schools expected to achieve equity even as resources diminished and needs intensified. Sam, head teacher at a semi-rural primary school, captured the cumulative effect of these pressures succinctly, stating, 'you don't often have the resources that you would like to have.'

In South Australia, several school leaders highlighted the inadequate public resourcing of public education, particularly in relation to the adequately publicly funded private sector. Austin, principal at a regional primary school, for example, framed equity as inseparable from funding politics and policies suggesting equity depended on 'whether or not we're federally funded or state funded appropriately [and] how that money is divvied up across all the schools,' alongside his own responsibility to act as a 'moral compass' in deciding where limited funds should be spent. Alfred, principal at a regional/rural comprehensive school in South Australia, described the increasing difficulty of securing support for students with complex needs, stating that schools spend 'unbelievable amounts of time to try and get a few crumbs off the table,' only to find that specialist services and staff are often unavailable even when funding is secured. Furthermore, Aubrey similarly suggested that structural

underfunding constrained what schools could achieve, noting that ‘if someone was happy to give me some money, I could really go about doing things differently, and ... getting results for kids.’ These accounts point to a perception among school leaders that equity work in public schools is shaped not only by internal decision-making, but by broader funding arrangements that systematically limit schools’ capacity to respond to growing and unevenly distributed complex holistic student needs.

Again, what is striking is the consistency of this experience across two different funding and governance systems. Leaders in Scotland, with its local authority model and PEF allocations, described similar resource constraints as leaders in South Australia’s state-based system with its distinctive public-private funding divide. In both contexts, equity work in practice meant navigating inadequacy, making difficult decisions about who and what could be prioritised under conditions of scarcity.

This cross-system convergence suggests that resource inadequacy is not an accident of particular policy designs but a structural feature of how equity reforms are typically resourced. This finding extends existing enactment research by highlighting how material conditions shape the interpretive work leaders can do. When resources are insufficient, professional judgement becomes less about how to pursue equity and more about how to triage within inadequacy, a finding with significant implications for how we understand the persistent gap between equity rhetoric and equity outcomes.

### ***Perspective 3: narrow measures of student performance may jeopardise more holistic approaches of success***

The first two perspectives revealed that leaders understand equity as dynamic and enact it under conditions of scarcity. This third perspective identifies a further structural constraint: the misalignment between how leaders conceive of equity and how systems measure success. Specifically, dominant performance and accountability frameworks constrain schools’ capacity to enact equity in holistic ways. Across Scotland and South Australia, school leaders expressed concern that system-level measures of success remained narrowly focused on narrow attainment indicators, particularly in literacy and numeracy, despite growing expectations that schools address a far broader range of student needs. As Spencer, headteacher at a primary school in Scotland, expressed, ‘we need to have a focus on some of those, more than just those narrow literacy and numeracy side of things.’ It is worth noting that some school leaders in South Australia expressed hopefulness that the new approach to education in South Australia would value and focus on broader performance indicators of ‘success,’ like wellbeing and student progress over time.

Still, as the participants in this study were experienced school leaders having seen initiatives and system leaders come and go, overall, they described a

disconnect between what they believed constituted meaningful progress for students and what systems generally recognised as improvement or success. Scott in Scotland, for example, emphasised that the outcomes schools increasingly work toward for children are often indirect and relational, including 'feeling better about themselves, having improved efficacy, having improved confidence, better health and well-being.' Yet such outcomes were rarely captured within existing and previous accountability frameworks. Seth, headteacher at an urban secondary school in Scotland, also captured this tension, noting that 'it's the measures that we're being measured against ... that's a difficulty,' suggesting that school leaders' equity-oriented work was often rendered incongruent or undervalued by prevailing metrics.

Several school leaders voiced a desire for performance measures that reflected the 'whole child' and aligned more closely with their conceptions of equity and related aims. For example, South Australian principal Austin suggested that broader forms of more individualised performance measurement would not only better reflect the reality of equity work in schools, but also support leaders and teachers professionally, stating that 'if we've got measurements on that person (student) rather than just what that child can achieve in literacy and numeracy ... then I can focus on the whole child and see some measures that show improvement. And that for me is equity.' For Austin, and for many leaders in both systems, the narrow metrics that dominated accountability frameworks actively worked against the holistic equity work they saw as essential. He noted that, 'NAPLAN for me would probably be a distant last in terms of importance.'

In Scotland, Sandra brought up that to better support equity, broadening performance metrics should also be accompanied by expanded and coordinated supports, including 'more multi-agency type supports,' highlighting again the interdependence between accountability, resourcing, and equity of holistic outcomes, and the limits of what schools can do to holistically support students' needs on their own. Spencer, also in Scotland, further noted that much of the equity work schools invest in, particularly relational, preventative, and wellbeing-focused interventions, unfolds over long timeframes and is 'almost impossible to measure' according to a specified timeframe, for example in traditional school improvement cycles. These observations point to a fundamental tension: the outcomes leaders see as central to equity are precisely those that current accountability systems render invisible.

In South Australia, Aubrey described system responses to improving equity in education as 'tweaking the edges of the existing status quo rather than doing transformational change (that would be needed to really make a difference),' while Scottish principal Sylvia felt that 'the all-consuming drive for attainment outcomes through certain measures poses barriers to real equity and provision of outcome.' Some leaders suggested that longer school improvement cycles, greater flexibility, and a stronger focus on holistic competencies and



capabilities, like wellbeing, creativity, and curiosity would better align performance monitoring with more meaningful equity goals.

Alex's account in South Australia illustrated how alternative conceptions of success were already shaping leadership practice at the school level, even if not formally recognised by the system. While acknowledging that schools continue to be judged on 'SACE<sup>1</sup> completion, A to E grades, [and] standardised testing,' he described success in more expansive terms: whether young people had 'transitioned from school into a productive member of the community,' however they defined that for themselves. As he explained, equity meant asking whether the system had enabled students 'to attain their own personal goals, what they want to do,' regardless of whether those aspirations aligned with traditional academic hierarchies.

Overall, in both countries school leaders' sentiments suggested similar perspectives that when accountability systems privilege a limited set of outcomes, they risk undermining the relational, contextual, and long-term holistic efforts that leaders view as central to equity. This metric misalignment does more than frustrate leaders, it actively shapes what equity can mean in practice. When systems signal through their accountability structures that only narrow outcomes matter, leaders are positioned to enact equity primarily through those terms, regardless of their broader professional commitments. This tension reinforces the conclusions of the previous two perspectives. Taken together, the three perspectives reveal that equity cannot be meaningfully advanced without alignment between how equity is defined, how success is measured, how resources are allocated, and how schools are held to account. The next section synthesises these findings and considers their implications.

## Discussion and implications

This study set out to understand how school leaders conceptualise and enact equity across two distinct policy contexts. What we found was not divergence but convergence: despite significant differences in governance, funding, and accountability arrangements, leaders in Scotland and South Australia described strikingly similar experiences of equity work. Equity was understood as dynamic and relational, requiring constant professional judgement (Perspective 1). It was enacted under conditions of resource scarcity, through difficult prioritisation decisions (Perspective 2). And it was constrained by accountability frameworks that privilege narrow outcomes over the holistic work leaders see as essential (Perspective 3).

This cross-system convergence is the study's central finding, and it carries significant implications. If leaders in quite different policy contexts face essentially similar challenges, then the persistent gap between equity rhetoric and equity outcomes cannot be attributed primarily to the particularities of policy design. The problem appears more structural: equity reforms are typically conceived as

policy priorities but not resourced as such. Leaders are positioned to enact equity through professional judgement and local meaning-making, but within material conditions that systematically constrain what that enactment can achieve. The result is a form of equity work that is simultaneously essential and insufficient, maintained by leaders' professional commitment despite, rather than because of, the conditions in which they work.

By examining school leaders' perspectives in two distinct yet similar policy environments, this study offers fresh insight into how system-level equity policies and priorities are understood, negotiated, and operationalised at the school level. The findings in this article suggest a structural disconnect in equity related education reform between policy intentions and practical realities, especially regarding the resources schools are given to enact these policies. That is, school leaders are expected to respond to increasingly complex and common student educational and health needs, yet are inadequately resourced to do what would be required when their schools' performances are evaluated through metrics that privilege narrow, standardised, and often short-term indicators of success. These findings contribute to research literature and practical work (e.g. Ainscow and Chapman 2025; Fullan 2025) striving to help explain why equity remains stagnant in education systems performance and complicated to practice at the school level despite strong rhetorical system level commitment to equity and sustained related education reform efforts.

This finding extends policy enactment research by highlighting the material conditions within which interpretive work occurs. Enactment theory has productively drawn attention to how policies are translated, interpreted, and narrated in schools (Ball, Maguire, and Braun 2011; Singh, Thomas, and Harris 2013). Our findings suggest that this interpretive work is not freely creative but occurs within tight material constraints. When leaders lack adequate resources, their professional judgement becomes less about how to pursue equity and more about how to triage within inadequacy. The conceptual flexibility that characterises leaders' understanding of equity (its dynamic, contextual character) may itself be partly a response to scarcity: a way of maintaining professional orientation toward equity even when the conditions for achieving it are absent.

One aspect that our findings in this study indicate could be contributing to the challenge of enacting equity-oriented reforms is that the concept of equity in education remains ambiguous, interpreted differently by policymakers and the school leaders responsible for enactment. A further implication is that school leaders' ability to champion equity is constrained by dominant accountability frameworks that do not value enhancing social equity the same way they reward individual excellence. If equity continues to be measured mainly through standardised assessments, the deeper, relational, and context-sensitive work that leaders describe as central to equity will remain undervalued and unsupported. This misalignment does more than frustrate leaders; it actively shapes what equity can become in practice. When systems signal through

their accountability structures that only certain outcomes matter, they constrain the equity work that leaders can pursue, regardless of professional commitment or policy rhetoric.

These findings suggest that when system-level policies set high but vague or narrow expectations for equity outcomes, school-level responses are shaped primarily by the resources and policy signals leaders receive. Where funding, staffing, and support services are insufficient or fragmented, equity becomes difficult to operationalise, regardless of commitment, or expertise; despite numerous other system level policies and initiatives aimed at enhancing equity in education, such as school improvement, teacher autonomy, or student agency.

As much of the world continues to experience increasing economic and income inequalities (Piketty 2014; Wilkinson and Pickett 2018), equity will likely remain a central pillar of education policy in the coming years. As policy agendas broaden to encompass issues traditionally addressed in other social sectors, such as health, wellbeing, and community services, schools will continue to be expected to respond to a wider range of needs than ever before (Australian Government 2018; Scottish Government 2022; OECD 2025). Yet, even with the best intentions, schools alone cannot fulfil these expectations. In Scotland, the University of Glasgow's Centre for Transformative Change in Schools (formerly the Robert Owen Centre for Educational Change) focuses on educators' professional learning and collaborative practice to support transformational changes and address equity. South Australia does not currently have a similar research centre. Without coherent and coordinated support from across government and stronger alignment between policy goals and frontline realities, the promise of educational equity will continue to exceed the capacity of schools to deliver it.

Our findings point to *three conditions* that would need to change for equity reforms to achieve their stated aims.

First, systems would need to move beyond rhetorical commitment toward shared, operational conceptions of equity that align policy intentions, the dynamic realities of school life, resource allocations, and accountability metrics. Currently, the definitional ambiguity of equity enables systems to claim commitment while leaving the difficult work of definition to individual leaders.

Second, the chronic underfunding of equity work, evident across both Scottish and Australian contexts, needs to be addressed. Our findings suggest that continuous investment in building evidence literacy and data use in schools can help school leaders and teachers engage more effectively in policy dialogues, but such capacity-building cannot compensate for inadequate resources.

Third, accountability frameworks would need to expand to include broader measures of educational success that acknowledge the relational and contextual dimensions of equity work, alongside robust and cross-sectoral support structures that recognise and adequately resource the social and health dimensions of students' needs.

Ultimately, the leaders in this study are not failing to enact equity. They are enacting it daily, through professional judgement, moral commitment and constant adaptation to student need. But they are doing so within conditions that make genuine equity achievement structurally unlikely. Only when policy definitions, resource allocations, and accountability mechanisms align with the complex realities of school life will education systems be able to make meaningful progress toward the equitable futures they so often promise.

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## Author contributions

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributors

*Caitlin Senior* is a PhD candidate in Education Policy at the University of Melbourne.

*Pasi Sahlberg* is Professor in Educational Leadership at the University of Melbourne. He is former director general in Finnish Ministry of Education.

*Glenn C. Savage* is Professor of Education Futures at the University of Melbourne.

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