

Benevolent Disadvantage: How Equity Practices Reproduce Inequality in Education

Abstract

Educational institutions are under increasing pressure to demonstrate their commitment to equity, inclusion, and fairness. Over the past two decades, this has produced an expanding landscape of policies, frameworks, and interventions designed to address inequality.

However, persistent disparities in educational outcomes raise important questions about the limits of these approaches. While existing scholarship has examined how inequality is reproduced through structural arrangements, organisational processes, and performative compliance, less attention has been paid to how inequality may also be reproduced through equity practices themselves.

This paper introduces the concept of benevolent disadvantage to capture the process through which well-intentioned practices of equity, care, and inclusion can constrain rather than liberate marginalised groups. Drawing on critical race theory, Black feminist scholarship, and institutional analyses of performativity, the paper develops a conceptual framework that examines how equity operates across policy, organisational practice, and lived experience. It argues that within accountability-driven systems, equity work can become embedded in institutional logics of performance and legitimacy, enabling organisations to demonstrate action while leaving underlying structures of inequality largely intact.

By shifting the analytical focus from whether institutions are “doing equity” to how equity is enacted, this paper offers a new framework for understanding the relationship between equity, care, and inequality in education, and outlines implications for future research and policy.

Keywords: equity in education; educational inequality; institutional performativity; inclusion; education policy; benevolent disadvantage

Introduction

There is an emerging form of disadvantage within education systems, in which the very logic of benevolence produces a form of constraint. This paradox emerges in a context where educational institutions operate under sustained pressure to demonstrate that they are addressing inequality. Over the past two decades, this pressure has generated an expanding landscape of equity policies, inclusion strategies, diversity frameworks, and fairness commitments. These interventions are often grounded in genuine moral intent and institutional commitment to improving outcomes for disadvantaged and racially minoritised groups. Yet, despite sustained policy attention, educational inequalities remain persistent across institutional contexts.

Existing scholarship has provided robust explanations for how inequality is reproduced through exclusion, stratification, and structural design (Reay, 2017; Ball, 2003). Work on racialised organisations further demonstrates how inequality is embedded within seemingly neutral organisational structures, routines, and decision-making processes (Ray, 2019). More recently, scholarship on diversity governance and institutional performativity has shown how equity initiatives can function as organisational performances that signal progress while leaving underlying power relations largely intact (Ahmed, 2012). Black feminist scholarship has long cautioned that inclusion, when detached from structural transformation, can reproduce rather than disrupt existing relations of power (Lorde, 1984).

While these bodies of work provide critical insight into how inequality is reproduced, they primarily focus on exclusion, structural reproduction, or performative compliance. Less attention has been paid to how inequality may also be reproduced through inclusion itself,

and there remains limited conceptual language for understanding how these equity practices can function as mechanisms through which inequality is maintained and stabilised.

Within contemporary education systems, institutions are required not only to address inequality, but to demonstrate that they are doing so. One of the primary ways this is achieved is through policy: fairness policies, inclusion strategies, and equity frameworks that provide visible evidence of institutional action. However, when compliance has been demonstrated, the appearance of action can become sufficient, even where the underlying structures producing inequality remain unchanged. In this sense, policy can function performatively, operating as evidence of moral and organisational action rather than as a mechanism of structural transformation.

What remains under-theorised, therefore, is how equity practices—particularly those grounded in moral intent and institutional care—operate within organisational logics that shape their effects. While performativity scholarship explains how institutions demonstrate action, it does not fully account for how well-intentioned interventions themselves can participate in the stabilisation of disadvantage. Addressing this gap requires a framework capable of analysing how intent, action, and outcome become misaligned within institutional contexts.

The concept of benevolent disadvantage is introduced to capture this dynamic. Benevolent disadvantage describes the process through which institutions reproduce inequality through well-intentioned equity, care, and inclusion practices that constrain rather than liberate marginalised groups, often operating through the illusion of equity rather than its material realisation. Analytically, this process can be understood through a set of interconnected dynamics: institutional recognition identifies need; intervention responds through targeted support; positioning situates individuals within institutional narratives of deficit or

dependency; and stabilisation enables institutions to demonstrate action while leaving underlying structures largely intact. In this sense, inequality is reproduced not despite equity work, but through its routine and institutionalised enactment.

This paper introduces benevolent disadvantage as a conceptual framework for understanding how institutional equity work can function simultaneously as a site of moral commitment and a mechanism of inequality reproduction. In doing so, it makes three contributions. First, it extends scholarship on institutional performativity by examining how care-driven and equity-framed interventions can reproduce inequality. Second, it provides conceptual language for understanding how institutions can maintain legitimacy through visible equity action while avoiding structural transformation. Third, it offers a framework for analysing how policy, organisational practice, and lived experience interact to stabilise disadvantage across educational contexts.

The paper proceeds as follows. The next section examines the limits of institutional equity work and the role of performativity in policy responses to inequality. The paper then develops the conceptual framework of benevolent disadvantage before examining how this dynamic operates across educational policy and institutional practice. The final section considers implications for education policy and future research.

In doing so, the paper not only critiques the limits of existing equity approaches but also offers a conceptual tool for analysing how these limits are produced and sustained within institutional practice.

2. The Limits of Institutional Equity Work

It is important to acknowledge that equity policies and inclusion initiatives have, in many cases, contributed to meaningful forms of support and improved access for marginalised groups. From this perspective, such interventions represent necessary and progressive

responses to longstanding inequalities within education systems. However, recognising these contributions does not preclude a critical examination of how these same practices operate within institutional contexts that shape their limits, effects, and unintended consequences.

While equity policies are often framed as institutional responses to inequality, they are implemented within organisational systems already structured by hierarchy, power, and historically embedded inequalities. Critical race and Black feminist scholarship have long demonstrated that institutions can reproduce inequality even when they are formally committed to fairness and inclusion (Lorde, 1984; Ray, 2019). Within education, this is reflected not only in persistent outcome disparities, but in how institutions define need, allocate support, and determine whose experiences are recognised as legitimate (Reay, 2017).

Victor Ray's (2019) theory of racialised organisations is particularly useful here. Rather than locating inequality in individual bias or policy failure, this perspective highlights how organisational structures, norms, and decision-making processes are themselves shaped by racialised social relations. In educational contexts, this influences how ability is defined, how behaviour is interpreted, and how support is distributed.

These organisational dynamics operate alongside governance structures that require institutions to demonstrate effectiveness through measurable indicators of success (Ball, 2003). As a result, equity work is often translated into policies, interventions, and performance metrics designed to evidence institutional action. Sara Ahmed (2012) shows how diversity and inclusion work can function as technologies of legitimacy, where the documentation of commitment becomes central to how institutions demonstrate moral and organisational responsibility.

Together, these dynamics create conditions in which equity policy operates within institutional logics of performance, accountability, and legitimacy. Within such contexts, institutional success becomes tied not only to improving outcomes, but to demonstrating that

equity work is being undertaken in ways that are visible and auditable. It is within this intersection that the limits of institutional equity work begin to emerge.

2.1 Performativity, Moral Legitimacy, and the Politics of “Doing Equity”

This shifts equity from a purely ethical commitment to a form of institutional performance. Schools are required to demonstrate fairness, document inclusion, and evidence support through policies, interventions, and data systems that make equity work legible to regulators, stakeholders, and the public.

Performativity scholarship highlights how measurable outputs and policy documentation can function as proxies for action (Ball, 2003). In this sense, the presence of an equity policy, inclusion framework, or diversity initiative can begin to stand in for the work itself. Sara Ahmed (2012) extends this argument by showing how diversity work becomes embedded in documents, committees, and strategic plans that demonstrate commitment while leaving underlying power relations largely unchanged.

This is not a claim about institutional bad faith, but about the conditions under which equity becomes absorbed into organisational logics of compliance, accountability, and reputational management. Within such contexts, demonstrating equity can take precedence over its transformation, as institutions respond to both moral expectations and regulatory pressures.

Black feminist critiques further highlight that inclusion and care can be mobilised in ways that secure institutional legitimacy while leaving material inequalities intact (Lorde, 1984).

When inclusion is framed primarily as access to existing structures, rather than transformation of those structures, it can function as a stabilising mechanism that allows institutions to present themselves as progressive while maintaining existing hierarchies.

Taken together, these dynamics suggest that equity work operates not only as a site of moral commitment, but also as a site of institutional self-preservation. It is within this tension between ethical intent and organisational constraint that the conditions for benevolent disadvantage begin to take shape.

These dynamics have implications not only at the level of institutional structure, but also for how students come to understand themselves within educational spaces. The ways in which support is framed, delivered, and experienced can shape perceptions of ability, belonging, and entitlement, raising important questions about how equity practices influence the formation of student identities.

2.2 Care as Governance

Alongside performativity and accountability, institutional responses to inequality are also shaped by moral and affective logics. Educational institutions frequently position themselves as sites of care, framing equity work through narratives of safeguarding, wellbeing, and support. Within this framing, institutions are cast as morally responsible actors working in the interests of vulnerable or disadvantaged groups.

However, care does not operate outside of power. Critical scholarship demonstrates that institutional care can function simultaneously as support and regulation, shaping how individuals are recognised and categorised within organisational systems. In education, practices of care often operate through assessment, monitoring, and targeted intervention, determining who is identified as in need and what forms of support are deemed appropriate.

These classifications are not neutral. Decisions about who requires support, how support is delivered, and what outcomes are expected are shaped by broader social hierarchies and institutional norms (Reay, 2017; Gillborn, 2005). Within racialised institutional contexts, care

can therefore reinforce deficit framings of marginalised students, positioning institutional intervention as both necessary and benevolent.

At the same time, institutional care contributes to the production of moral legitimacy. Schools that demonstrate care through inclusion initiatives, wellbeing programmes, and targeted support can present themselves as ethically responsible organisations. Within accountability-driven systems, this moral positioning becomes intertwined with institutional reputation and regulatory standing.

Care, therefore, operates not only as an ethical practice but as a form of governance. Students are both supported and categorised, monitored, and managed through institutional frameworks that shape how inequality is understood and addressed. In this sense, care can function simultaneously as protection and containment, particularly when institutional responses focus on enabling individuals to navigate existing structures rather than transforming them.

Extending Black feminist critiques of institutional inclusion, this analysis highlights how practices of care can function as mechanisms for managing rather than transforming inequality (Lorde, 1984). It is within this intersection of care, legitimacy, and governance that benevolent disadvantage becomes analytically necessary, revealing how well-intentioned practices of support can operate as mechanisms that stabilise inequality under the guise of institutional benevolence.

3. A Conceptual Framework of Benevolent Disadvantage

Building on the preceding discussion, benevolent disadvantage is proposed here as a conceptual framework for analysing how inequality can be reproduced through practices explicitly designed to address it. Rather than evaluating equity work in terms of success or

failure, the framework shifts attention to how equity operates within institutional contexts, and how well-intentioned interventions can become entangled with existing structures of power, accountability, and legitimacy.

Benevolent disadvantage captures a specific dynamic in which institutional efforts to support marginalised groups function simultaneously as sites of care and as mechanisms of constraint. This dynamic does not emerge from the absence of equity work, but from its incorporation into organisational systems that shape how need is defined, how support is delivered, and how institutional responsibility is demonstrated.

The framework conceptualises this process across three interconnected domains: policy, organisational practice, and lived experience. At the level of policy, equity is articulated through strategies, frameworks, and commitments that signal institutional intent and moral positioning. Within accountability-driven systems, these artefacts also function as evidence of action, enabling institutions to demonstrate compliance and responsiveness. As a result, the presence of policy can become conflated with the realisation of equity, particularly where documentation is treated as a proxy for transformation.

At the level of organisational practice, policy commitments are translated into interventions, support structures, and data-driven processes. These include targeted provision, pastoral systems, and mechanisms for identifying and addressing disadvantage. While such practices are often designed to respond to need, they are shaped by institutional logics of categorisation, measurement, and resource allocation. In this sense, they can reproduce particular ways of defining ability, vulnerability, and worth, often aligning with broader social hierarchies.

At the level of lived experience, students encounter these practices in ways that shape their understanding of themselves and their position within the institution. Access to support may coexist with implicit messages about deficit, expectation, and belonging. Equity practices

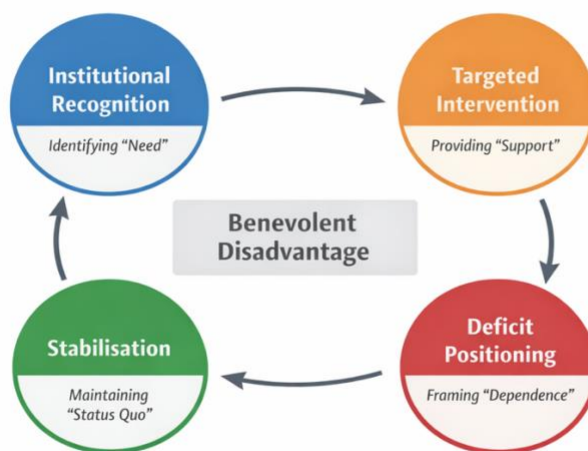
therefore operate not only as mechanisms of provision, but as sites in which student identities are produced and negotiated.

Across these domains, benevolent disadvantage operates through a set of interrelated processes: recognition, intervention, positioning, and stabilisation. Institutional recognition identifies particular individuals or groups as in need of support; intervention responds through targeted provision; positioning situates those individuals within institutional narratives of need; and stabilisation occurs as these processes enable institutions to demonstrate action while leaving underlying structural conditions largely intact. In this sense, inequality is reproduced not despite equity work, but through its routine enactment.

Importantly, this framework does not position equity practices as inherently problematic, nor does it assume institutional bad faith. Rather, it foregrounds the conditions under which equity becomes absorbed into existing organisational arrangements, limiting its capacity to produce structural change. Benevolent disadvantage therefore reorients analysis from whether institutions are “doing equity” to how equity is enacted, and with what effects.

The framework is summarised in Figure 1.

Figure 1: The Benevolent Disadvantage Framework



Policy → Organisational Practice → Lived Experience
(Recognition → Intervention → Positioning → Stabilisation)

Rather than a linear sequence, these processes operate recursively, reinforcing one another over time and contributing to the persistence of inequality within educational systems.

4. Operationalising Benevolent Disadvantage in Educational Contexts

Having developed benevolent disadvantage as a conceptual framework, this section considers how this dynamic operates within educational contexts. Rather than presenting empirical findings, the aim here is to illustrate how the framework can be used to analyse everyday institutional practices through which equity, care, and inclusion are enacted. In doing so, the section demonstrates how benevolent disadvantage can emerge across policy, organisational practice, and lived experience.

At the level of policy, educational institutions are required to articulate their commitment to equity through formal strategies, frameworks, and accountability mechanisms. These policies often emphasise fairness, inclusion, and targeted provision for disadvantaged groups, and are positioned as evidence of institutional responsibility. However, when examined through the lens of benevolent disadvantage, policy can be understood not only as a response to inequality, but as part of a system in which the demonstration of action becomes central. The presence of policy can therefore function as a form of institutional assurance, signalling that inequality is being addressed, even where the underlying structures that produce inequality remain unchanged. In this sense, policy operates both as a site of intent and as a mechanism through which institutional legitimacy is maintained.

At the level of organisational practice, these policy commitments are translated into concrete forms of intervention. This includes targeted support programmes, pastoral systems, inclusion strategies, and data-driven approaches to identifying students deemed to be in need. Such practices are often framed as necessary and supportive, providing access to resources that may otherwise be unavailable. However, these interventions are also shaped by institutional logics of categorisation and measurement. The process of identifying need requires the classification of students, often along lines that reflect broader social and educational hierarchies. As a result, support can become tied to deficit-oriented framings, where students are positioned in relation to what they lack rather than the structures within which they are operating.

The enactment of benevolent disadvantage is not merely a top-down effect of policy but is mediated through the everyday labour of practitioners. Educators often operate within a “double bind”: they may recognise the reductionist nature of deficit-based categorisation yet remain required to use these very categories to secure essential resources and support for their students. Within accountability-driven systems, caring for a student is frequently translated into administrative labour, where support depends on making a student’s “disadvantage” or “vulnerability” visible and legible to institutional frameworks.

This creates a tension in which practitioners’ genuine moral intent becomes entangled with institutional requirements for documentation and compliance. The labour involved is both administrative and affective. Administratively, educators are required to monitor, categorise, and report in ways that sustain students’ visibility within systems of support. At the same time, they must manage the dissonance of providing care that is materially beneficial while reinforcing the very deficit narratives through which that care is made possible.

In this sense, institutional care operates not only upon students, but through practitioners themselves. By requiring support to be framed through narratives of need and dependency,

the system directs practitioners' labour toward managing the symptoms of inequality rather than transforming the conditions that produce it. Benevolent disadvantage therefore emerges not simply as a feature of policy or structure, but as a dynamic reproduced through the relational and affective practices of care within educational institutions.

This process is particularly visible in data-driven approaches to equity, where institutions use attainment gaps, behavioural indicators, or demographic categories to identify and monitor disadvantage. While such practices are intended to enable targeted support, they can also reinforce particular narratives about who is seen as underperforming, at risk, or in need of intervention. Within this framework, the act of recognition becomes inseparable from the production of institutional categories that shape both perception and response.

At the level of lived experience, students encounter these processes in ways that shape their understanding of themselves and their place within the institution. Being identified as in need of support may provide access to resources, but it can also carry implicit messages about ability, expectation, and belonging. Students may come to understand their position through the language of support and intervention, internalising forms of deficit positioning even where support is intended to be empowering. In this sense, equity practices do not simply act upon students; they participate in the production of student identities within educational spaces.

Across these domains, the processes of recognition, intervention, positioning, and stabilisation can be observed in interaction. Recognition identifies students as in need; intervention provides targeted support; positioning shapes how those students are understood within institutional narratives; and stabilisation occurs as these processes enable institutions to demonstrate action without fundamentally altering the structures that produce inequality. The system, therefore, remains intact, even as it appears responsive and adaptive.

Importantly, these dynamics do not suggest that support should be withdrawn or that equity work is unnecessary. Rather, they highlight the need to critically examine how equity practices are structured and what they produce. Benevolent disadvantage draws attention to the ways in which support, when embedded within existing institutional arrangements, can function as a mechanism for managing inequality rather than transforming it.

By applying the framework in this way, it becomes possible to analyse how equity operates not only as policy or intent, but as a set of practices that shape institutional outcomes and lived realities. Benevolent disadvantage therefore provides a lens through which the relationship between care, inclusion, and inequality can be examined more critically, opening up new possibilities for both research and institutional change.

5. Implications and Conclusion

This paper has argued that inequality within education systems cannot be understood solely through the absence or failure of equity work but must also be examined through the ways in which equity itself is enacted. By introducing the concept of benevolent disadvantage, the analysis has shown how well-intentioned practices of equity, care, and inclusion can operate within institutional contexts in ways that stabilise, rather than transform, existing inequalities.

This has important implications for education policy. Current policy approaches often prioritise the visibility and measurability of equity work, encouraging institutions to demonstrate action through frameworks, interventions, and performance indicators. While such measures are not without value, the analysis presented here suggests that an overemphasis on demonstrable action can allow the appearance of equity to stand in for its material realisation. Addressing inequality therefore requires not only the expansion of equity initiatives, but a critical re-examination of how these initiatives are structured, enacted, and evaluated within institutional systems.

The framework of benevolent disadvantage also has implications for institutional practice. It highlights the need for greater attention to how support is conceptualised and delivered, particularly in relation to the ways in which students are identified, categorised, and positioned. Moving beyond deficit-oriented models of support requires a shift from approaches that locate disadvantage within individuals to those that interrogate the institutional conditions under which disadvantage is produced. Without such a shift, practices of care and inclusion risk functioning as mechanisms for managing inequality rather than transforming it.

For research, benevolent disadvantage offers a conceptual tool for examining the relationship between equity, institutional practice, and lived experience. Future work might apply this framework empirically across different educational contexts, exploring how these dynamics are experienced by students and enacted by practitioners. In particular, there is scope to examine how processes of recognition, intervention, positioning, and stabilisation operate across different institutional settings, and how these processes intersect with race, class, and other axes of inequality.

More broadly, this paper contributes to ongoing debates about the limits of equity within contemporary education systems. It suggests that the challenge is not simply to do more equity work, but to reconsider what equity work does within the institutional contexts in which it is embedded. Benevolent disadvantage provides a way of naming and analysing this tension, drawing attention to the ways in which care and inclusion can coexist with, and at times sustain, inequality.

In closing, the paper calls for a shift in how equity is understood and enacted within education. Rather than equating equity with action, policy, or provision, it is necessary to examine how these practices operate within broader systems of power and accountability.

Only by doing so can the illusion of equity be unsettled. Benevolent disadvantage, as developed in this paper, offers a way of making visible how inequality persists not in spite of equity, but through its institutional enactment.

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