The University of Manchester

Equity in Education: Mapping the Territory

First annual report of progress within the English education system from The Centre for Equity in Education, The University of Manchester

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Combining the strengths of UMIST and
The Victoria University of Manchester

Equity in Education: Mapping the Territory

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Summary

Equity is a pressing issue in England today. Government policy talks about moves towards creating a socially just society. In this context, the Department for Education and Skills has been dubbed 'the department for life chances' with a mission to promote excellence and equity for all. However, as we report, there is much evidence to suggest that the education system is currently anything but equitable – and that Government moves to address this, may actually reinforce inequity.

It is because of the stubborn persistence of inequity in the system that The Centre for Equity in Education begins here what we intend to be an annual process of analysing the nature of inequities in education. In this, our first report, we focus on mapping out the issues around educational equity and deciding what evidence might be brought to bear upon them. We present some evidence both of problems and of promising approaches. Our central task, however, is to set out the basis for the systematic monitoring of the state of equity in education. This will form a central plank of the Centre's future work.

Throughout, we aim to be both challenging – in exposing examples of inequity that are often hidden in official statistics – and constructive – in providing examples of policy and practice which promise to combat inequity. We anticipate that our reports will provoke debate amongst policy makers, professionals and interested users of the education system, and move equity issues up the political agenda. We also anticipate that they will act as a resource, suggesting issues to be tackled and identifying possible ways forward. With these aims in mind, this report also serves as an invitation to those with an interest in developing equity, both in and through education, to join in debate and inform the Centre's future work.

Equity: a pressing issue

We've made real progress since 1997. And we should be very very proud of it. But I am clear that we cannot stop here. Reform remains incomplete if we are to achieve the education system that our people deserve. So there is no better time than now to ask searching questions about the next steps towards a socially just society, a society where background is no barrier to success and social mobility is a reality. Over the next four or five years and beyond, we have to find the courage to keep on asking the difficult questions.[1]

Ruth Kelly 2005

These words of Ruth Kelly, Secretary of State for Education and Skills, underline the Government's continuing commitment to the development of an excellent education system which works to ensure equitable outcomes for all learners. However, the familiar mantra of "much done – much still to do" takes on new meaning in the light of evidence which suggests that the system currently is anything but equitable. Here are some examples from 2005:

- Performance data suggests that the achievement gap between pupils entitled to free school meals and their peers is, if anything, widening[2].
- Only three per cent of pupils in the 200 highest performing secondary schools at GCSE were eligible for free school meals. This was despite these schools being situated in postcode areas with eligibility rates for free school meals of around 12 per cent[3].
- Six per cent of looked-after children gained five or more GCSE passes. Only one per cent gained university places[4].
- 8,000 pupils, in 146 mainly inner city schools, account for 20 per cent of all truancy[5].

Whatever has been achieved in recent years, our education system continues to produce winners and losers – and heavy losers at that. It is because of the stubborn persistence of inequity in the system that we begin here what we intend to be an annual process of analysing the nature of these inequities and exploring what might be done about them. We aim to be both challenging – in exposing examples of inequity that are often hidden in official statistics – and constructive – in seeking out examples of policy and practice which promise to combat inequity.

In this first report, we focus on mapping out the issues around educational equity and deciding what evidence might be brought to bear upon them. We present some evidence here both of problems and of promising approaches. However, our main intention is to set out the basis for a more systematic monitoring exercise which will follow in subsequent years.

The report is divided into a series of sections. In the first of these, we explore some possible definitions of equity. We then consider the ways in which the Government seeks to address equity issues and some of the issues to which current policies give rise. This leads us to consider the need for monitoring educational equity on an ongoing basis, and how this might be achieved. Finally, we outline our plans for a series of annual reports.

[1] *Kelly, R. (2005) Education and social progress. 26 July 2005 (London DfES, http://www.dfes.gov.uk/speeches/speech.cfm?SpeechID=242).*

[2] *DfES (2005) Has the social class gap narrowed in primary schools? A background note to accompany the talk by the Rt Hon Ruth Kelly MP, Secretary of State for Education and Skills, 26 July 2005 (London, DfES).*

[3] *The Sutton Trust (2005) Rates of Eligibility for Free School Meals at the Top State Schools (http://www.suttontrust.com/reports/RatesOfEligibilityforFreeSchoolMealsattheTopStateSchools.pdf)*

[4] *NCH (2005) Close the Gap for Children in Care (http://www.nch.org.uk/uploads/documents/close%20the%20gap_.pdf)*

[5] *Garner, R. (2005) A tough nut to crack – Why Blair is failing at his main subject, Independent, 22.09.05 (http://education.independent.co.uk/news/article314255.ece)*

Making sense of equity

What does equity mean?

Equity is something that everyone believes in, but that no-one wants to define too closely. However, if we are serious about monitoring equity and promoting the development of a more equitable system, definitions are crucial.

Our view is that there is no single definition, not least because the concept of equity is culturally bound. That is to say, people with differing values, beliefs, and experiences may interpret the idea in a variety of (possibly contradictory) ways. And, of course, this means that different ways of thinking about equity may suggest alternative ways of creating a more equitable education system.

Yet, this is not necessarily a problem. Instead of thinking of a single sort of equity, it might be more helpful to think in terms of many 'equities', with different definitions reflecting different values and concerns. These definitions may sometimes be at odds with one another. Nevertheless, they may also be useful for illuminating different situations or illuminating the same situation in different ways.

Interestingly, there seems to be little attempt to define equity in the literature on education. We have therefore drawn on literature from other fields – health care in particular – to identify four notions of equity which can help our thinking about education. Each of these embodies some idea of what it means to treat all individuals fairly:

1. **Equity as equality** – This implies that fairness will be achieved if everyone is treated in the same (i.e. equal) way.
2. **Equity as minimising divergence across social groups** – This means reducing the gaps between the outcomes achieved by the most advantaged and least advantaged social groups. An important qualifier here is that any gaps should be reduced by improving the achievements of the less advantaged, not by lowering the achievements of the most advantaged.
3. **Equity as achieving a common standard** – This requires the setting of minimum levels (sometimes referred to as 'floor targets'), that all groups of learners are expected to achieve, for example, a basic level of literacy and numeracy competence.
4. **Equity as meeting the needs of all individuals** – This suggests that fairness requires differential treatment in order to take account of student diversity.

One of the problems we have in education in England is that, not only is there no consensus about which of these versions of equity (if any) should guide policy, but that there is scarcely any debate about them – and yet the four perspectives set out above are very significant in terms of the aspirations and actions they suggest.

On entering into debate about the meaning of equity, it is important to recognise that different versions of equity are not always mutually exclusive. For example, ensuring everyone meets a common standard (such as a basic level of literacy and numeracy competence) could be part of moves to minimise gaps between the achievements of the most advantaged and least advantaged learners.

It is also possible to use alterative ways of thinking about equity to scrutinise particular aspects of the education system. For example, it can be argued that a common curriculum is equitable because there is an expectation that all learners should have access to the same knowledge. However, they could be taught in different ways which would take account of their individual learning styles and aptitudes. In this way, treating everyone in the same way in one instance, does not necessarily preclude opportunities to meet individual needs in another.

Evidence around success to widen participation into higher education also raises interesting questions around notions of equity. DfES data[6] shows that the absolute gap in numbers entering higher education from manual and non-manual backgrounds has widened in the past 40 years, suggesting growing inequity. Yet using the same data, an alternative notion of equity that looks to minimize divergence across social groups can point to an improvement in the relative odds of entry for those from non-manual backgrounds over time. Furthermore, a greater number of people than ever are now able to reach the 'floor target' of entry into higher education.

[6] *DfES (2003) 21st Century Skills: Realising Our Potential, Cm 5810, (London: Stationery Office)*

Equity in the context of education

Our concern in this report is with the formal education system – the network of institutions, resources and practices that are managed by and for the state. This system creates a particular set of arenas within which equity issues arise and to which the definitions of equity set out above can be applied. In simple terms, there are three such arenas:

1. *There is the arena of the system itself.* Questions can be asked about whether access to the system is equitable, how equitably resources are distributed within the system, and whether practices within the system are inherently equitable.

2. *There is the arena of outcomes from the system.* Questions can be asked about how far achievements are distributed equitably across learners, and whether the system impacts on learners' life chances in equitable ways. These questions need not only be about individuals. We can also ask about the outcomes of education for particular social groups or particular communities – or, indeed, for society as a whole.

3. *There is the arena of the social context in which the education system is located.* Education does not take place in a social vacuum. Learners enter the system from very different social backgrounds and exit into very different social situations. If these contexts are marked by inequity, then that will inevitably impact on the education system and its outcomes. There are questions to ask, therefore, about equity in social contexts and about whether the education system's interactions with those contexts promote, inhibit or undermine equity. Moves to enhance equity outside education, for example in relation to regeneration programmes, may have interesting effects with regard to this.

Generating questions about equity

Equity is not simple. When we put together the ways in which equity can be defined and the contexts within which equity issues manifest themselves, we see that analysis can become very complex. For instance:

- From the establishment of universal elementary education onwards, successive waves of educational reform have arguably created an education system that is more equitable in its processes and outcomes. Yet the relationship between social background, educational achievement and life chances has never been broken. So has the education system become more equitable or not?

- For generations, children who were regarded as having difficulties and disabilities have been placed in one or other form of special education. Some argue that special education constitutes unequal treatment, depresses these children's achievements and limits their life chances. Others argue precisely the opposite. Others again argue that it meets some of their needs, but at the cost of widening the gap in terms of outcomes. So is it equitable or not? And what difference does it make when we know that for most of its existence, special education has been disproportionately populated by children coming from disadvantaged social backgrounds, or that the labour market offers limited opportunities for its former students?

- In a slow and sometimes painful process, the education system has begun to be aware of its inherent cultural biases which marginalise and disadvantage certain ethnic groups. However, is it equally aware of the cultural biases which affect other sorts of social groups? And is it more equitable to change the system to accommodate these groups or to change (some would say, to educate) these groups so that they can access education as it is currently offered? Is an education system that is customised to boys, or to girls, or to children living in disadvantaged areas, say, more equitable than one which offers the same opportunities to everyone? And are different types of outcomes for different groups more equitable than common outcomes differentiated by level of achievement?

These issues and others like them, are what need to be addressed in any assessment of educational equity. The role that educational policy may play in this is considered in the next section.

The New Labour Government and equity

...I see my department as the department for life chances. And that is why I see it as my job to boost social mobility...Our task is to make sure that for everyone involved in learning excellence and equity become and remain a reality[7].

Ruth Kelly 2005

Since 1997, New Labour education policy has pursued the twin goals of excellence and equity. These terms seem to get used in very particular ways:

- Excellence – often badged as the 'standards agenda' – refers to the continual improvement of the education system so that all learners receive high-quality provision which enables them to achieve as highly as possible.

- Equity – often linked to the 'social inclusion' agenda – is about ensuring that those learners who are most at risk of low achievement have proper access to opportunities to learn and are given the right level of support to ensure that they too achieve as highly as possible.

For New Labour, there is no contradiction between these two goals. In a highly-effective education system, offering quality to all and second chances or additional support to those who need it, everyone will achieve that of which they are capable. Social background will no longer determine educational achievement and everyone, therefore, will have equal life chances.

However, mixed reports have emerged recently of existing policies intended to enhance equity in the New Labour sense. For example:

- Academies are intended to 'benefit the poorest families in the poorest parts of Britain' by revitalising schools in the most deprived towns and cities. However, The Guardian suggested that two thirds of Academies were recruiting fewer – in some cases, far fewer – pupils who were entitled to free school meals than had the 'failing' schools they replaced[8].

- A DfES-commissioned report evaluating the Sure Start programme found that the least disadvantaged families gained more benefit from the programme than the most disadvantage, and indeed, that the most disadvantage might well have less access to services than those outside programme areas[9].

[7] *Kelly, R. (2005) Education and social progress. 26 July 2005 (London DfES, http://www.dfes.gov.uk/speeches/speech.cfm?SpeechID=242).*

[8] *Taylor, M. (2005) Are city academies really helping the poorest children? The Guardian, 31.10.05, pp.8-9*

[9] *National Evaluation of Sure Start (2005) National Evaluation Report: Early impacts of Sure Start Local Programmes on children and families. Research Report NESS/2005/FR/013 (London, DfES)*

The New Labour Government and equity continued

- A study of the Excellence in Cities programme by the NFER[10] found some teachers were concerned that the programme had little direct impact on the majority of pupils. It was suggested that there was little evidence to show that pupils in Excellence in Cities areas were making any more progress at Key Stage 4 than similar pupils in other areas.

- DfES's own analysis of achievements in primary schools suggested that the link between social background and educational achievement was proving stubbornly resistant to policy interventions[11] (DfES, 2005). Although schools with the most disadvantaged intakes were making some progress, they were not closing the gap on their more advantaged counterparts, nor were the most disadvantaged pupils in those schools the ones who were producing the improved results.

- Whilst there has been an increase in the overall numbers of entrants into higher education, leading research-intensive universities are recruiting significantly below their published 'benchmarks' for pupils progressing from state schools, lower-socio-economic groups and low-participation neighbourhoods[12].

Examples such as these raise questions about the policies currently deployed by Government to pursue excellence and equity – and indeed, about the assumption that these two goals (as defined here) can be pursued simultaneously. Specifically:

- How ambitious is this combined excellence-and-equity agenda? Does it imply that all learners will achieve at equally high levels – or simply that the most disadvantaged learners will not be allowed to fall too far behind?

- Ultimately, excellence is defined in terms of outcomes. But are these outcomes defined in ways that are achievable by all, or will some learners always be at a significant advantage in achieving them?

- Can policies which may appear to have equitable intentions have unintended and inequitable consequences? For example, will concentrating efforts on raising the achievements of some learners, disadvantage others?

- Does the Government have the right policies for overcoming the disadvantages faced by some learners? Is education reform enough, given the powerful links between social background and educational achievement? Is the aim to break this link, and if so, is this a realistic aim and what wider social policies are needed?

We have no doubt that the Government is committed to the development of what it understands to be an excellent and equitable education system. However, that pursuit is marked by a lack of clarity, an unwillingness to ask 'difficult questions' and a series of unresolved tensions. For practitioners who must work in this confusing policy context, the consequence is a continual need to make sense of, and to trade-off between, contradictory policies. Hence, there is, on the one hand, evidence which shows that across the education system as a whole, some circumscribed gains have been made – the fall in the numbers of schools deemed to be failing would be one such example[13]. But there is little evidence to suggest that national policies have been able to bring about the sorts of profound transformations needed to break the link between background and achievement. Clearly, something significantly different is called for. The question is 'what?'.

Throughout 2005, policy reforms which are intended to have an impact on the state of equity have been pursued – though rather than offer something 'significantly different', some policies may do more to reinforce existing ideas. For example:

- In Early Years learning, the 'toddler curriculum'[14] has continued the Government's emphasis on equipping pre-school children with the skills they need to engage with the primary curriculum. In this, we see an ongoing concern to help 'level the playing field' in terms of learners' starting points within compulsory schooling. It also suggests that the Government is trying to find yet another lever to pull to enhance equity in a context where existing policies seem to be proving less than totally effective.

- The 14-19 White Paper[15] has an ambitious aim: "…to transform secondary and postsecondary education so that all young people achieve and continue in learning until at least the age of 18" (p. 4). The paper proposed the creation of vocationally oriented pathways for learners. Here we see promising moves to meet the needs of different learners, especially those most at risk of social exclusion who may have given up on academic pathways and might otherwise disengage from education entirely. However, the continued emphasis on GCSEs and A-levels in much their current forms "as cornerstones of the new system" (p.6) suggests a continuing academic/vocational divide, in which vocational qualifications are not given equal status, and existing disparities are reinforced.

- The rationale behind the launch of Education Improvement Partnerships (EIPs) includes allowing schools to "collaborate with others in their community to drive a shared agenda for improving standards, to share resources and good practice, to ensure high quality provision for all young people" (DfES, 2005: Foreword)[16]. In this, local community needs are to be a factor shaping provision. Interestingly, this suggests that moves towards equity must be responsive to learners' backgrounds, and recognises that different groups of learners may have different needs. But the emphasis on 'a shared agenda for improving standards' is still cast as a driving factor, suggesting that tensions between a desire to enhance equity and the pursuit of academic excellence, remain embedded and unresolved.

These tensions and ambiguities are nowhere more evident than in the Schools White Paper[17] around which debate is raging as this report goes to press. Both proponents and opponents of the White Paper argue, in part at least, from an avowed concern with equity. For proponents, the further enhancement of diversity and choice is the best chance of creating an education system where every school is excellent – and excellence is the way to equity. For opponents, the ending of local control over schools (particularly with regard to admissions) and the more powerful role promised to parents, are bound to favour the most advantaged schools and parents at the expense of those who are most disadvantaged.

What is clear is that we cannot assume, simply because a policy is cloaked in the language of equity, that its effects will be equitable. On the other hand, neither can we assume, simply because the Government's record is ambiguous on these matters, that policy does not embody a set of resources which can be used by professionals and others to build a more equitable system. Government policy needs and deserves a sophisticated analysis to match its complexity. That will be one of our tasks in future reports.

[10] *Kendall, L. et al (2005) Excellence in Cities: the national evaluation of a policy to raise standards in urban schools. (Nottingham, DfES)*

[11] *DfES (2005) Has the social class gap narrowed in primary schools? A background note to accompany the talk by the Rt Hon Ruth Kelly MP, Secretary of State for Education and Skills, 26 July 2005 (London, DfES).*

[12] *See www.hesa.ac.uk/pi/home*

[13] *Ofsted (2005) Annual Report of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools 2004/5 (London: TSO)*

[14] *Ward, L. (2005) Toddler curriculum criticised by European education expert, The Guardian, 15.11.05, p.13*

[15] *HM Government (2005) 14-19 Education and Skills. Cm 6476 (London, HMSO)*

[16] *DfES (2005) Education Improvement Partnerships: Local collaboration for school improvement and better service delivery (London, DfES)*

[17] *HM Government (2005) Higher Standards, Better Schools For All: More choice for parents and pupils. Cm6677 (London, HMSO)*

Monitoring progress

To their credit, governments over the past decade and a half have put in place routine strategies for monitoring the education system and its outcomes. These are considerably more sophisticated than anything that previously existed when policy makers had to rely on limited administrative data and intermittent research studies.

Currently, the information on which monitoring is based is of two kinds:

- large databases (such as the National Pupil Database) containing information on the inputs and outputs – principally, learner characteristics and attainments – of different parts of the system; and

- the reports of organizations (such as Ofsted) charged with inspecting the quality of different parts of the system.

In addition, there are some sources of information that are not primarily concerned with education – for example, the Indices of Multiple Deprivation, the Health Poverty Index, and the Quality of Life Index – but which can be combined with educational data. Together, these different sources of information can be very useful for exploring equity issues. They tell us a good deal, in particular, about how outcomes are distributed across learners from different backgrounds and about the perceived quality of different institutions.

However, there are many important questions that current data sets do little to illuminate. National data sets are limited by their focus on a narrowly-defined range of outcomes, their necessarily crude characterisation of individual learners and their concern with evaluating provision against predetermined notions of 'best practice'. What none of them allows us to do in any depth is to explore the **processes** of education. There is a whole range of questions which we must ask, but which current data sets can do little to answer. For example:

- Why do different groups of learners achieve systematically different outcomes?

- What is the nature of the relationships between learners' backgrounds, their experiences of education, and examination and test results?

- How can education providers best respond to local community circumstances and learners' characteristics?

Some knowledge about these issues emerges from educational research. This shows that a different sort of knowledge is embedded within the education system and held by practitioners and participants in that system. However, there is currently no way of systematising these different types of knowledge and therefore it is not fully accessed and fed back into policy making.

To access such knowledge, we must **look in depth** at what is happening within particular settings and listen to the voices of those engaged in the education system. This will help to reveal phenomena that remain hidden in the large data sets. For example:

On ethnic segregation

- Despite some evidence of progress in encouraging ethnic integration within local communities, the emphasis on greater choice within the education service is having a worrying counter-effect in some districts. In one primary school that is recognised for achieving outstanding results in raising pupil attainment, there has been a significant increase in the admission of children of Asian heritage. Indeed, the current reception class is made up entirely of children from this background. The headteacher knows that white families who live in the immediate area have enrolled their children in schools elsewhere. Interestingly, some local Asian families are making a similar choice because they prefer their children to be educated in a more 'mixed' environment.

- In a large city, a secondary school for boys has experienced a similar trend over recent years. Once again, the headteacher knows that white families who live in houses adjacent to the school enrol their children in schools in other districts. Such trends are likely to produce various knock-on effects within districts and on the work of neighbouring schools. In this particular case, the nature of the school population is shaped by concentrations of boys from districts where there are high levels of youth gang activity in relation to the distribution of drugs. Inevitably, the impact of the disputes that occur in these districts spill over into the life of the school.

On staff recruitment and retention

- Staff recruitment and retention is a factor that undermines the capacity of some schools to provide a high quality education for all young people in their communities. Some schools, particularly those that have a relatively poor reputation, find it difficult to appoint suitably qualified teachers while schools that are seen as being more successful tend to face far fewer difficulties in this respect. The worry is that these circumstances act in a way that strengthens the gap between high achieving and low achieving schools.

- In one city authority, music is a striking example of this phenomenon. At one point recently, three schools in the city were unable to offer music because they had no qualified staff. At the same time, students in another city school had access during a typical week to 14 musicians.

- One school in challenging circumstances, having been unable to recruit, and/or afford, the qualified teachers needed to fill all its vacancies, recruited some Graduate Teacher Programme trainees to meet the need for teachers. In one instance, a trainee maths teacher, having just left a non-teaching career in industry, was given a 70 per cent timetable during his first term in training. He left the school at Christmas feeling unable to cope with behaviour issues and his high teaching load. Pupils also lost out, having been taught in the first instance by a poorly supported trainee, who was then replaced by a succession of supply teachers.

On difficulties of providing support for learners in unstable housing situations

- A year six boy has attended seven schools in all, as a result of the house moves of his family. In explaining the situation, the headteacher pointed to a massive file of papers that had accumulated over the period. As a result of her careful reading of the file she has found out that in each of the previous schools the boy's eye squint had been identified by his teachers and he had been referred for further investigation. Unfortunately, his frequent moves had meant that in every case these investigations had hardly got going and, it seems, his parents had not taken up offers of appointments. Consequently, there were long delays between each attempt to get things done. Sadly, the specialists who have now looked into the case are saying that it is very likely he will lose the sight of one eye, something that probably could have been avoided by earlier intervention. This is a classic case that policies for more closely integrated Children's Services are designed to resolve.

Monitoring progress continued

On the price of institutional success

- A secondary school serving one of the most disadvantaged areas of the country was under pressure to improve its performance in order to reach its 'floor targets'. Like many schools in similar circumstances, it chose to 'play the GNVQ game'. Instead of offering its students a range of GCSE courses on which they were likely to fare badly, it concentrated its efforts on getting them through a single GNVQ. Since this is worth four GCSEs in the performance tables, the school believed that if it could get its students one GNVQ plus one 'genuine' GCSE, it would have a reasonable chance of meeting its target. Other schools have pursued this strategy with success, for the institution at least – it is less clear what this achieves for students. However, in this case, the teaching or assessment of the GNVQ went awry and there was widespread failure. As a result, the students lost their chance of accreditation and the school went into special measures.

A second type of data about equity issues in education which is not systematically accessed, relates to the approaches which those working in education are developing to enhance educational experiences and outcomes for disadvantaged learners. Again, we must look to the knowledge embedded in the system in order to draw attention to what we see as **untapped potential** for moving the education system in a more equitable direction. Some examples illustrate what we have in mind:

School-to-school collaboration

- School-to-school collaboration, of the sort that has been encouraged in the secondary sector by the Leadership Incentive Grant, seems to have some potential for fostering system-wide improvement, particularly in urban contexts. Whilst the pattern of impact is mixed, there is evidence of how such arrangements can provide an effective means of solving immediate problems, such as staff shortages; how they can have a positive impact during periods of crisis, such as during the closure of a school; and, how, in the longer run, schools working together can contribute to the raising of aspirations and attainment in schools that have had a record of low achievement. It seems, too, that collaboration may help to reduce the polarization of the education system, to the particular benefit of those students who are on the edges of the system and performing relatively poorly.

- There seem to be similarly encouraging possibilities emerging from the various forms of school federations that exist. One example tells of how a highly regarded school provided support for a school that was due to close, having had a long history of low attainment. Increasingly, the school had been deserted by the families of the relatively wealthy area in which it was located, with the remaining students coming from other estates. In many such situations, the final cohorts of students left at a closing school suffer as key staff seek other posts and leave. This can create a 'sinking ship', with an increasingly negative approach amongst those students and staff who are left behind. However, in this instance, as a result of the various forms of support that were provided by its partner school, the remaining 150 year eleven students attained the best results at the school for some years.

Supporting the well-being of vulnerable learners

- The work of the Behaviour and Education Support Teams (BEST) initiative points to some interesting possibilities for building the capacity of schools to support vulnerable learners. The teams were set up to promote emotional well-being, positive mental health, positive behaviour, and school attendance, through the provision of multi-agency support in target schools and for individual families. The impact of the BESTs seems to have been most positive within primary schools. For example, an exclusion rate of 25 pupils in one year in one school was reduced to nil the following year. In another school, members of the BEST worked with a family which had four children at the school who were all very much at risk. Staff described the heavy input that had been given to the family and the fact the there had been a transformation in one child, who now in Year 6, was a sports coach and a peer mediator. It may be that the nature of secondary schools, including their size, organisational complexity and pressure to improve standards in terms of examination results, create particular barriers to the establishment of effective partnerships with such outside support agencies.

Involving the local community in educational provision

- Work stimulated by the Children's Fund points to the potential within communities for supporting the learning and development of young people. In a small town, volunteers from a local cricket club brought children from economically poor areas to take part in various coaching and social activities. The volunteers, who included the club's professional player, a young man from South Africa, talked with obvious pleasure at the way their actions had opened up possibilities for the children involved. In the same town, two local women rented a former pub and turned it into a successful drop-in centre for teenagers, many of whom had records of being involved in criminal activities.

Developing a new model of provision

- A group of schools serving a highly disadvantaged part of an urban authority have begun to think collectively about the ways in which they enable their students to learn. They have come to realise that they do much more than simply teach the curriculum and that their work is equally concerned with building a supportive ethos, encouraging students to take responsibility for their learning, supporting families with their problems, and working on health issues. Together, they are developing a model of provision which they can use as the basis for their engagement with the Every Child Matters agenda and which they can share with other schools in the authority.

The development of school and further education links with higher education

- The national Aimhigher programme, and the 'widening participation' funding allocations from the Higher Education Funding Council for England, have allowed the development of a sophisticated range of local initiatives to help raise pupil aspirations and attainment levels, and to develop links between schools, colleges and universities. Mentoring programmes, masterclasses, activity days and residential summer schools have been developed by universities explicitly targeted at groups currently under-represented in higher education.

Towards a monitoring system

It is clear, then, that there is information within the system that can help us to have a better understanding of how equity issues play out in education and of the sorts of approaches which might contribute to the development of a more equitable system. However, it is not enough to replace the generalizations and limited foci of large data sets with a series of unreliable and unexplored anecdotes.

With this in mind, we propose that one way forward may lie in developing a rich, but systematically assembled, data set, specifically concerned with issues of equity in education, which can fill current gaps in knowledge and will be strongly illuminative. This must draw together information from existing data sets – on examination results, where pupils go to school, and community contexts – and supplement this with newly generated data relating directly to issues in equity in different communities and localities.

To update such a data set annually could then provide information about whether, over time, the education system is becoming more equitable. It could also serve as a basis for engaging with practitioners and policy makers in a dialogue about the state of equity in education. This would be vital to develop a better understanding of the nature of the challenges facing the education system with regard to issues of equity, and to stimulate discussions about how the education system might be made more equitable which are meaningful to policy and practice.

We anticipate that the monitoring process would involve interrogating the three arenas identified earlier in the light of the different definitions of equity which we have proposed. This certainly involves accessing the existing large data sets with this 'map' of equity issues in mind. However, it also involves generating new types of data to capture micro-level processes. This might be done, for instance, through a series of 'nested case studies', which situate learners' experiences within educational institutions, community contexts, local authorities and regions, and within the context of national policies. Developing case studies could involve interviews with: learners and their families, school and college leaders, chief education officers and directors of Children's Services, and national level policy makers.

A series of case studies could then be developed in localities with different characteristics and in which different issues in equity might be expected to arise as a result. Such comparable case studies, along with an analysis of national policies and existing data sets, would provide a rich knowledge base about the state of equity in education.

Next Steps

In the coming years we intend to produce annual reports that focus on the question, 'how equitable is the English education system?'. The reports will:

- interrogate existing large data sets in the light of our map of equity issues;
- supplement these with case studies to show how equity issues play out 'on the ground';
- undertake analyses of major national policy initiatives in the light of their likely implications for the development of equity.

The reports will be systematic in that they will try to revisit issues, data sets and localities on a recurrent basis. To this extent, they will provide a routine monitoring of the state of equity in the education system. However, as we have stressed throughout this first report, equity is complex. Unlike pupil attainments, say, or participation rates in higher education, it is not something which can be 'measured' in any straightforward way. Our reports, therefore, while as authoritative as possible, will also necessarily be illuminative.

We anticipate that our reports will provoke debate amongst policy-makers, professionals and interested users of the education system and that these debates will move equity issues up the policy agenda. We also anticipate that they will act as a resource, suggesting issues to be tackled and identifying promising ways forward.

We therefore wish the process of developing these reports to be as interactive as possible. The Centre for Equity in Education already operates under the guidance of a 'Thinktank' of senior professionals in education. However, we welcome feedback from anyone involved in education who wishes to draw our attention to some issue in or practice relating to equity. Our contact details are given at the end of this report.

The Centre for Equity in Education

The Centre for Equity in Education is based in the School of Education, The University of Manchester and is led by Professors Mel Ainscow and Alan Dyson. Dr Kirstin Kerr is its research associate. The Centre focuses on analyzing equity issues and on developing models of policy and practice for a more equitable education system. To this end, it works closely with policy makers and practitioners, and its work is informed by a Thinktank of senior LEA officers, headteachers, policy makers and academics.

Left to right: Averil Gould, Mel Ainscow, Kirstin Kerr and Alan Dyson

The Thinktank has made important contributions to the development of this report. However, the authors alone are responsible for the views expressed herein and for any errors or omissions.

Further information about the work of The Centre for Equity in Education can be obtained from Mrs Averil Gould,
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