# LEADING FOR EQUALITY

## Making Schools Fairer

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# 1

# Ideas of equality: The contested concept

In this opening chapter, we set out what the book as a whole is intended to achieve. We also provide initial ideas to help you reach a clearer understanding of what is implied by equality in education, and stimulate you to consider the relationship between equality and school practice in more detail.

In this chapter we ask you to think about:

- the aims and structure of the book
- what equality means in schools
- the range of language and concepts used in this area
- what various ideas about equality imply about aims.

Throughout the book we use case examples that help to illustrate the points being made. They are a convenience sample drawn from interviews with current head teachers and other leaders in state and private schools in England, Wales and Scotland. The structure of the education system is complex and varied in the four countries of the United Kingdom (UK), with types of school reflecting differing governance arrangements and degrees of autonomy. Our case examples are illustrative of the range, including academies, community, foundation and faith schools. A reference providing more detail about types of schools is given at the end of the chapter.

The names of the schools are pseudonyms, but we provide information about the age range, whether co-educational or single-sex, and the geographic location of each, as appropriate. The schools selected are generally those that were suggested to us as having responded to often challenging circumstances in interesting ways. The case examples are boxed so you can see clearly on the page where there are illustrations of practice. These are intended to encourage debate and enable you to reach your own conclusions about appropriate practice.

In this chapter, illustrative case examples are drawn from two co-educational schools in the south of England: Winburg Academy (11–18), and Elands Community School (11–16).

## Aims of the book

For many, one particular story has come to summarize how education does not live up to ideals of equality. This is the parable in the Gospel of Matthew in the Bible that tells the story of a master who for safe-keeping gives ten bags of gold to one servant and only one bag to another. In his master's absence, the servant with ten bags uses enterprise to double the gold. He is praised by the master. The servant with one bag is so afraid of losing it that he buries it and then returns the single bag to his master, explaining that he has kept it safe. For this, the master punishes him and his gold is given to the servant who was initially given the most:

> The man who has will always be given more, till he has enough and to spare; and the man who has not will forfeit even what he has. (*Matthew* 25: 28–30, New Testament)

This parable has generated the phrase the 'Matthew effect', capturing the idea that those who have most can generally use it to get more. The 'Matthew effect' summarizes much of the impact of education worldwide. Those who come from an advantaged background often cluster together in schools, in ability groups, in universities and, ultimately, in jobs with prospects, and in influential social and political roles. Despite the widely held belief that education is a mechanism for achieving greater equality, evidence suggests the contrary is often the case (OECD, 2014a). We hope that through this book we can contribute to countering the 'Matthew effect' and help you to do the same.

An overview of the nature and scale of the problem is a good way to begin. It is salutary to recognize just how much inequality remains in education in the twenty-first century. For example, the 2015 Millennium Goal for all children to have a primary education has now been deferred until 2030

(Oxfam, 2010). Some might assume that attendance at school is primarily an issue for developing countries. This is not so. It is true that the scale of inequality may be much greater in developing economies, but even in the UK in autumn 2014 nearly 5 per cent of children were persistently absent (DfE, 2015a). Across the globe, for those who are in school, education generally reproduces socioeconomic divisions (Reay, 2010). Socioeconomic class is a relevant factor, but children's own accounts and statistical evidence attest to many other factors such as ethnicity or sexuality that should be irrelevant, but nevertheless relate to their being unhappy or unsuccessful at school (Hull et al., 2009; Reardon, 2011).

We would guess that you have started reading this book because you are interested in equality, but perhaps that does not quite cover it. Perhaps you are passionately committed to equality. Commitment is common, yet education systems remain unfair (Fair Education Alliance, 2014). This is the conundrum at the heart of this book: on the one hand, practitioners aiming at equality, and on the other, profoundly unequal education chances in many parts of the world. Despite the potential for education to transform children's lives, it is much more likely to do so for some groups of children than others.

Despite their commitment to equality, school leaders and teachers do not necessarily think through coherently what they aim to achieve and how. This book will help practitioners and especially leaders to clarify goals and alternative approaches, and to develop practice by considering values, attitudes, structures and pedagogy. The book does not offer definitive answers. These do not exist. It does however offer a challenge and ideas to find ways forward in your own classroom, department, school or cluster of schools so that, even if education cannot eradicate the 'Matthew effect', each person reading this book can, in his or her own way, weaken it.

The leaders who are the target audience are not just those with formally designated authority roles, such as head teachers/principals or deputies; rather, we understand leadership to be action based on values that is intended to influence the direction and outcomes in a school, or part of a school. Defined in this way, leadership is open to many, including teachers, learners and community members. Though leadership may be open to all, there is not equal access, as some groups are less likely to achieve a leadership role. For example, in many countries women teachers are less likely than men to progress to a leadership role. Teachers who are from minority ethnicity groups or from a minority religion or who have a disability are also less likely to become leaders. This is part of the inequality picture and we discuss it in Chapter 4.

The primary focus is on practice in schools in the countries of the UK, but we believe that much of the discussion will have relevance to those

leading in Europe, in other parts of the world and in other education contexts. The first part of the book in Chapters 1 to 5 sets out some of the ideas and policies that form the context for those working towards greater equality in education. The chapters that follow focus on equality in relation to a number of areas: socioeconomic class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, religion, migrant status and special leaning needs. Whilst the focus in each chapter is on a single characteristic, we include consideration of how other characteristics may interact with that characteristic to shape learning and outcomes. In Chapter 3 we consider this in more detail by exploring the idea of intersectionality.

We are dealing with complex ideas, each in a challenging and wide area of practice. Of necessity, this demands some selection, so we focus on the issues that schools may find most relevant or most challenging, or both. Each chapter will start with a brief summary of content and indicate the areas we would like you to think about. At the end of each chapter we summarize key action points, and include ideas about what it might be helpful to reflect on and discuss with colleagues, learners and the wider community. We also suggest further reading so that you can follow up areas that are particularly important to you. We hope that these elements at the end of each chapter will provide a useful basis for ongoing professional development focused on increasing equality.

## Ideas of equality: so where do we start?

Most practitioners and policy makers in education would emphasize a commitment to equality as a fundamental value. The language may vary, referring not only to equality but also to related terms such as equity, social justice, inclusion and fairness. Each person, of course, will have a particular notion of what is implied by fairness, by equality and so on. However, often such understanding is quite hazy. It is uncommon for leader and teacher preparation programmes or for practitioners to engage explicitly with what is meant by equality and related terms.

Instead, we tend to use our experience as a means of understanding the context, to make assumptions and to decide how to respond. However, there are problems with this (Applebaum, 2008). First, our experience is shaped by our individual history and culture. Consequently, it may be a poor guide to understanding the experience of those who are very different from ourselves. Also, we tend to see ourselves as the hero of our own lives, so the way each of us may be part of an unjust system is obscured. We may discern unfairness in the way others act in other schools, but are less likely to recognize it in ourselves and in our own school, department or classroom.

For this reason, it is important that we each interrogate our commitment to equality and try to unpack what we mean by it, what the problem is and what we, together with others, can do to address it.

The justification for this book, therefore, and for the time you may give to reading it, is summed up in an aphorism from over two thousand years ago by the Roman historian, Livy: 'Experience is the teacher of fools'. This goes against a central belief in education: to progress in teaching or leading a school, it is assumed that experience counts for a great deal. Though there is initial teacher education and preparation for leadership roles, the major part of becoming a professional is through an apprenticeship model. We learn on the job from colleagues and from practising the art of teaching and leading. But what has been done before has led to the situation where schools offer a very unequal service to different groups. Chapter 4 outlines in more detail the evidence of how some groups of learners and staff are supported much more successfully than others. So learning by experience is likely merely to perpetuate a practice that has resulted in inequalities. In this sense, experience is an inadequate guide to challenging inequality.

A hard lesson for practitioners to accept is that they play some part in the production of inequality, and that what they have learned to date in their professional practice is unlikely to be adequate to change this. Better understanding of oneself and one's part in the current system is a foundation for setting out to challenge and change things, but it is a tough call. So the answer to the question, 'where do we start?' is in building our understanding of what goes on in education, how we are part of it, and how we might be clearer about our values and what needs to be done. This is the aim of the book.

## Words and concepts

The way into exploring any area of practice is through language. The language in education is particularly tricky, being a minefield of related but different terms. 'Equity, equality, inequality, equal opportunity, affirmative action, social justice and, most recently, diversity' (Blackmore, 2009: 3) are in common use, each of which may be understood differently depending on organizational and national context. In the press of the everyday, we may assume that we know what we mean by a term and that others think the same, but this is unlikely. We need to consider how the language is used and link this to understanding the principles or criteria that each term generates, in order to make choices about policy and action; in effect, we need theory to underpin practice.

We make a start here by exploring four key concepts used widely – equality, equity, inclusion and social justice – to provoke thought about the practical implications of how they are understood and how inequality can be attacked in schools.

## Equality

'Equality' is the term that is perhaps most widely used in education. In many contexts, equality is connected with sameness. For example, boys and girls are equal so they should be treated the same. The same tax should be levied on those with the same income. This kind of thinking is embedded in a much-quoted formula that is relevant to education:

> Assuming that there is a distribution of natural assets, those who are at the same level of talent and ability, and have the same willingness to use them should have the same prospects of success, regardless of their initial place in the social system. (Rawls, 1968: 73)

This seems a logical goal, but it falls apart quite quickly when related to education. The term used repeatedly, 'the same', is in the sense that two objects might be of the same weight or the same value. But children are not objects, and the 'talent and ability' and 'willingness' of each cannot be weighed against that of another to see if they are the same, because these very qualities in themselves may be shaped by unequal circumstance. Talent and motivation may not be absolute and innate, but forged by the conditions of upbringing and the experience of schooling.

In meritocratic societies such as that of the UK, people tend to see those who have more ability or make a greater effort as deserving a greater reward. A child who appears to have little ability in a specific subject, who does not try or is disruptive, may be judged less worthy of reward. Yet not only the child's background but also the experience of school may have led to such behaviour and so depressed potential ability. The curriculum and pedagogy may better support children with the kind of abilities and intended future path that mirror the experience of the majority of teachers. The 'Matthew effect' can be discerned in action. Those who are perceived to be talented and try harder, often from a background that has nurtured these qualities, thrive. Those who are perceived to have less, even if caused by circumstances beyond an individual's control, enter a downward spiral. Consequently, if equality is interpreted as expecting the same outcomes for those with similar abilities and effort, it is likely to favour those children who have experienced conditions that foster ability and motivation. Rawls' formula may not help much, in practice.

The 'sameness' Rawls refers to was a key component when equality legislation was established in Europe. Some believed that treating everybody the same embodies equality. Give the same curriculum to boys and girls – not domestic science for one and woodwork for the other. Ask the same questions of staff applying for a post – no probing family plans of women applicants only. However, whilst the examples given seem to offer equality, extending the idea to other areas soon raises problems. Is the same curriculum suitable for all? Can learners and staff with disabilities be treated the same as others? The same treatment may have a differential impact. Equality, therefore, is unlikely to be achieved by equal treatment, even of those who appear to have similar natural assets. Equal treatment is likely to reinforce existing inequalities: equal treatment offers unequal opportunities. A change in language from equal treatment to equal opportunities, the goal of much European policy and legislation in the 1960s, signalled a fundamental change in approach: that differences in treatment can achieve greater equality. The head teacher of Winburg School reflected on how this plays out in making provision suitable for every child:

### Winburg: equal opportunities

I see it as about providing equal opportunities for everyone regardless of background, gender, sexuality or ethnicity. It is about equal opportunities in the curriculum, for outcomes and for accessing different parts of the school and making sure that provision is suited to everyone. The key thing is not to regard it as a bolt-on directed from the top, but something that suffuses the whole operation.

## Equity

Equal opportunities is a widely used concept, as in the case example above, but for many it is an inadequate concept. Numerous organizations and individuals now use the term 'equity' instead, to indicate a different kind of intended outcome. Where equality relates to 'sameness', equity majors on 'difference', and indicates valuing different abilities and choices. Consequently, the aim cannot be the same outcomes for all. The Nobel Prize-winning economist Sen (2012) has been very influential in how we think about success in social organizations. He suggests we focus on a primary outcome of enabling people 'to lead the kind of lives they value – and have reason to value' (Sen, 1999: 18).

'Living a life they value' is a phrase that has resonated since. The goal here is different from equal opportunities. It is not so much based on statistical analysis of examination results, correlated with various individual characteristics such as ethnicity or socioeconomic background, or numbers going into higher education. Rather, it is ensuring that each individual is supported so that he or she feels they belong to school, enjoy it and develop the capabilities to live a life that is successful in their own terms and is positively embedded in society. This has come to be known as a capabilities approach.

Schools may assert that this is already a goal. The evidence however does not support this. Schools in the UK are generally structured and have systems that prize academic talents and trajectories. This may be due in part to national policies, as discussed in Chapter 2, but also relates to the practice of leaders and teachers. The relative value given to alternative vocational routes varies throughout Europe (Clarke and Winch, 2007; Hyland, 2002), but, generally, a hierarchy is evident in which the worth of particular choices reflects the culture of the more privileged. Not all children are equally supported to equip themselves to live a life they value (Hutton, 2005). For example, a recent review concluded that in Scotland an 'ingrained and frankly ill-informed culture that somehow vocational education is an inferior option' is prevalent (Commission for Developing Scotland's Young Workforce, 2014: 5). In England, West and Steedman (2003: 10) believe that vocational education is 'widely viewed as remedial'. The assertion that schools value difference, that they are equitable, seems doubtful.

As with the discussion of equality as a goal, equity too raises difficulties. A learner's choice to move outside family expectations and experience may have heavy costs emotionally (and financially). Encouraging all children who might, for example, go to university to consider doing so reflects a particular set of values that will be alien to some learners. Should they be supported to choose a 'kind of life they value' that is often based on their family background, even if they are capable of higher education? The tensions were captured well by the head teacher of Elands School:

## Elands: careers guidance

I remember getting myself into trouble at a previous school because I was speaking to students after school and I was right in what I was saying, but the way I said it actually led to the cleaners in that block going on strike … All I said was, 'If you don't get a good education you're going

to end up doing a job like cleaning', which we know is highly likely, but it didn't make the cleaners feel particularly good about what they were doing.

The way we do it now is that we capture it in a slightly different way so when a student says, 'Well, I'm going to become a professional footballer so I don't have to worry about my education', we throw in little kinds of what I call disrupters, a bit of ambiguity. 'Of course that's great. The school will support you in that', but we say what happens if you tear a ligament and you are told you are never going to play again? What's the back-up plan? When a student says, 'I want to be a hairdresser like my mum', we say that's great, and if you got a degree from university you could be running a group of salons.

Whatever the interventions of a school, some learners will become cleaners or hairdressers or footballers. Staff attitudes to such outcomes need to be thought through. Does living a life of value inevitably involve higher education, skilled and more highly paid jobs? If so, it will inevitably exclude some.

Another difficulty is that throughout the world most policy that is aimed at achieving greater educational equity identifies groups who are perceived as disadvantaged and offers them additional attention or resources, or both; that is, improvement is aimed at selected groups, rather than considering the fitness of the system for all and improving it as a whole (Levin, 2003). One possible consequence of policy intended to improve equity, therefore, is that some groups of children are viewed as a problem to be solved, or that they and/or their family are in some way in deficit. As a consequence, many children not only suffer the effects of poverty, for example, but are then in effect also stigmatized, with the best of intentions in many cases, as a target for remediation.

To achieve a system that equips all 'to lead the kind of lives they value' (Sen, 1999: 18), the barrier or problem to be addressed is as much the school as the learner or the learner's family or community. This is one of the foundation messages throughout the book. We need to move the focus from fixing learners to fixing schools.

## Inclusion

There is confusion in the UK about the term 'inclusion'. Ainscow (2005) charts its differing use over time from an aim to reduce truancy and exclusions, to

the right of those with special needs to be educated in mainstream schools, to a broader understanding of accommodating difference and enabling participation. The broad understanding encompasses a need to remove barriers to learning and to achieve participation for all. For some, inclusion also involves feeling that you belong: to the school; to the community; to the nation. Ainscow suggests four key elements that define inclusion:

1. Inclusion is a process. That is to say, inclusion has to be seen as a never-ending search.
2. Inclusion is concerned with the identification and removal of barriers.
3. Inclusion is about the presence, participation and achievement of all students.
4. Inclusion involves a particular emphasis on those groups of learners who may be at risk of marginalization, exclusion or under-achievement. (adapted from Ainscow, 2005: 118–19)

This kind of comprehensive definition is less commonly used than that of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2012: 9). The OECD uses the term 'inclusion' specifically as an aspect of equity, which it defines as incorporating two elements: fairness and inclusion:

> Equity in education means that personal or social circumstances such as gender, ethnic origin or family background, are not obstacles to achieving educational potential (fairness) and that that all individuals reach at least a basic minimum level of skills (inclusion).

Consequently, inclusion is often used as the OECD does, to mean everybody achieving a basic level of education.

Consideration of what inclusion means leads to a further question: 'Inclusion into what?' Ainscow's definition suggests that it is not about helping struggling learners to adapt to the existing system, to be included in schools as they are, but transforming schools so that they are better matched to the needs and preferences of all and not just that portion of society that has been prioritized historically.

## Social justice

Finally, there is the concept of social justice, embedded, for example, in the *Standards for Leadership and Management in Scotland* (GTCS, 2012). The concept of social justice is concerned with processes to reduce the kind of

inequalities that education produces. Social justice as discussed by Furman (2012: 3) has a number of dimensions, all of which must be addressed together. First, 'distributive' justice demands that goods are shared out fairly. Goods here include emotional and intellectual, as well as physical, goods. So, for example, experienced teachers should be spread across schools in different socioeconomic contexts, across the ability range and not, as is often the case, just to 'good' schools, higher attainers or high-level courses. Second, 'cultural' justice demands action to address the domination of those groups that hold greater power in education, whether through socioeconomic advantage, such as the middle and upper classes, or by virtue of historically privileged characteristics such as gender or race. Racism and discrimination in relation to gender, sexuality or religion are targets here. Third, 'associational' justice aims to enable all to take a full part in decisions affecting their life, and to be critical and engaged learners and citizens.

This is a highly testing agenda for schools, but the central tenet is that all three – redistributing resources, ensuring all are equally included and empowering learners as critical citizens – need to be addressed simultaneously if social justice is to be achieved. The multi-dimensional approach generates an agenda for leaders' action in school:

> (a) They must raise the academic achievement of all the students in their school, that is, high test scores do matter; (b) they must prepare their students to live as critical citizens in society. (Capper et al., 2007: 111)

In short, social justice definitions demand that schools equip learners both to achieve in the current system and to challenge it. This is a second key message in the book.

## So where to now?

The confusion around terminology is in part because equality, equity, inclusion and social justice overlap and are sometimes used interchangeably, as if they mean the same thing, and sometimes as if they mean different things. Having discussed the four most common terms used in relation to making schools fairer, the chapters that follow generally use 'equality' as a convenient generic term, signalling a focus on the kinds of issues discussed in this chapter. You may decide that another term is more appropriate for you, and we hope you are now better able to make the choice.

This chapter has argued that equal outcomes are not a practical goal in education. Rather, the aim is instead to focus on establishing a system in

which all can feel they belong and achieve what is necessary to live a life they value. This implies treating learners and staff not the same but differently, compensating for previous disadvantage by distributing resources to favour those most in need, recognizing and valuing differing choices, rather than favouring, however inadvertently, the academic trajectory and White culture historically embedded in schools.

There is a film in which the hero wakes each morning to find it is the day before. The film title has generated an understanding of the phrase *Groundhog Day* (1993) to mean being caught in a never-ending cycle of the same happenings, only broken when fundamental change occurs in the individual. Schools are trapped in a 'Groundhog Day' where test results show that those from disadvantaged backgrounds or particular groups do less well than they should, and this finding appears again and again in reports from national and international organizations. If we are to break out of education's Groundhog Day, each leader and teacher needs to join with colleagues to make a transformative change in attitudes and practice to break the cycle. Not all will be on board. There may be conflict and failures. The default culture in schools is not fair, and leading change requires a clear vision and consistent, proactive action. In short, increasing equality in schools demands leadership from many.

## Key actions

Changing understanding and attitudes is not easily captured by a neat, bulleted list in a way that might be easier for more focused areas of activity to increase equality. Nevertheless this chapter has suggested some key actions:

- Work with colleagues to identify the range of terms in use in your department or school: equality, equity, inclusion, fairness, diversity, social justice, etc.
- Identify the assumptions that underlie the terms used and the outcomes intended. What kind of sameness or difference is implied in how children are treated or what they achieve?
- Challenge thinking that sees learners or their families as being in deficit, and instead identify what it is in the school that may be a barrier to learning.
- Agree with colleagues and the wider community what your school or department would look like if it was equitable or socially just. What are the goals? What indicators might demonstrate this?

### For reflection and discussion

In what ways does your organization or part of it embody the 'Matthew effect'? Consider the curriculum, pedagogy, use of resources and relationships with families and carers.

## Additional reading

Ainscow, M. (2005) 'Developing inclusive education systems: what are the levers for change?', *Journal of Educational Change*, 6 (2): 109–24.

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Saito, M. (2003) 'Amartya Sen's capability approach to education: a critical exploration', *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 37 (1): 17–33.

Walker, M. (2005) 'Amartya Sen's capability approach and education', *Educational Action Research*, 13 (1): 103–10.

For a more detailed explanation of the nature of types of school in the UK refer to www.gov.uk/types-of-school/overview (accessed 27.04.16).