Achieving Equality in Practice
some challenges for policy-makers

A staff development seminar in cooperation with the NESSE network of experts

In this NESSE seminar, Professor Sharon Gewirtz from King's College London was joined by Professor Stephen Gorard from the University of Birmingham to discuss some challenges for policy-makers who are concerned about promoting equality in and through education.

In the first part of the seminar, Professor Gewirtz underlined that **equality is complex, contested and multidimensional**. She began by introducing three kinds of equality goals that education policy-makers need to be concerned about.

Economic, cultural and political equality

Economic equality, explained professor Gewirtz, concerns the distribution of access to educational resources, including schools, good teachers and facilities. It also concerns the distribution of the cultural resources – the knowledge and credentials - that students need if they are going to access desirable forms of employment and avoid being confined to undesirable, poorly paid work or no work.

Cultural equality, the speaker continued, concerns the extent to which people's cultural identities, beliefs and values are recognised. If we are concerned about cultural equality, we need to ensure that all students and staff are able to learn and work in environments which are free from stereotyping and free from racist, sexist, homophobic and other kinds of abuse; and that curricula, pedagogies and assessment practices recognise students' diverse identities.

Political equality, explained Professor Gewirtz, concerns the extent to which people are able to participate in making the decisions that affect their lives. In education, she said, this involves a concern that teachers and students should not simply be passive recipients of policies that are "done to" them by policy-makers but that they should be actively involved in shaping the goals of education and the conditions within which they work and learn.

In thinking about these different equality goals in relation to education, argued Professor Gewirtz, we must consider not only how equality might be achieved inside schools and other educational institutions but also how educational institutions might contribute to equality in the wider society. In particular, she said, we need to ask three key questions:

- How far do education systems help to provide equal access to valuable economic opportunities?
- How far do education systems promote the knowledge citizens need if we are to create a more culturally just society?
- How far do education systems help students and teachers develop a desire for and the skills of active political citizenship?

Challenges for policymakers

For professor Gewirtz, there are four key challenges that policy-makers who wish to take the multi-

dimensional nature of equality seriously have to confront:

1. the absence of consensus about which equalities are the most important;
2. the limits to what education alone can achieve;
3. the range of practical obstacles to achieving equality;
4. the tensions between different kinds of equality which mean that it is impossible to achieve equality in every respect.

Challenge 1: The absence of consensus

There is currently not a consensus about which forms of equality are most important. To take just one example, said Professor Gewirtz, in France where there has traditionally been a commitment to the Republican ideal of *laïcité* (or secularism) there are heated debates about how far such a commitment is appropriate in a multicultural society. Many, she said, continue to adhere to the Republican ideal that privileges a universalistic conception of equality. Proponents of *laïcité* argue that children and teachers must leave their cultural or religious identities at the school gates; otherwise there is danger that discriminatory and unequal practices will be allowed to flourish inside schools – practices which will contribute to the production of wider social and economic inequalities outside schools. However, she added, increasingly there are challenges to the Republican ideal including challenges on the grounds that if cultural equality is not achieved and students' identities not recognised inside schools there is risk that the sense of self-worth of these students will be damaged and they will be alienated from school. Both positions, said the speaker, are motivated by concerns about equality but they are prioritising different kinds of equality. Hence policy-makers have to make hard choices – they cannot please everyone.

Challenge 2: The limits of education

There are obvious limits to what can be done to tackle inequalities through education alone, said Professor Gewirtz. She used again the example of cultural inequality. Students, she said, may have their identities recognised inside school, but if those identities are not recognised outside of the education system, the efforts of educators are easily negated. She illustrated this point using the comments of a teacher interviewed by the researcher Daniel Faas for a study of citizenship education in Germany. This teacher pointed out that although the school sought to promote an inclusive multicultural conception of citizenship, his Turkish students experienced difficulties in trying to move between different European countries as a consequence of discriminatory immigration procedures. Hence, said professor Gewirtz, the message that this teacher was trying to convey to his students that all of his students were equally valued, was contradicted by the messages his students were getting outside school that some categories of student, ethnically or nationally defined, are more welcome than others.

Challenge 3: Practical obstacles

There are numerous practical obstacles to achieving each of the kinds of inequality, said Professor Gewirtz. She focused on just one example - the obstacles to cultural equality posed by the attitudes and lack of preparedness of some teachers. Her argument was that **a basic requirement for the promotion of cultural equality in and through education is the existence of a teaching workforce that is aware of the dangers of cultural stereotyping, that treats students and colleagues with equal respect and that is comfortable and able to deal with a diverse mix of beliefs and value commitments.**

Unfortunately, the speaker said, **it is still possible to find examples of teacher racism in schools across Europe**. These range from displays of overt racism where, for example, students' ethnic or religious

identities are disparaged to more subtle forms of stereotyping, for example, teachers making generalisations about students' abilities or levels of motivation based on racialised categorisations that can have seriously damaging effects because it involves teachers seeing students not as individuals but through a lens of racialised stereotyping that can feed into low expectations.

But even where teachers are committed to anti-racist practice or to developing an approach to teaching and learning that recognises diversity and seeks to prepare students for living in a multicultural society, added professor Gewirtz, they do not always have the necessary expertise. Many teachers, she said, are afraid of allowing discussion of religious beliefs or cultural values because they think it will create tension or they do not deal with subjects that are outside their own comfort zones.

According to the speaker, the preparedness of teachers represents just one of the practical challenges for policy-makers who need to consider how best to develop the resources, attitudes and forms of professional expertise needed for an education system that is equipped to contribute to cultural equality. There are analogous challenges relating to the demands of political and economic equality.

Challenge 4: Tensions between the demands of different equality goals

As the example of debates in France already showed, noted Professor Gewirtz, it is not possible to achieve all kinds of equality simultaneously in every respect. If we prioritise economic equality there is a danger that we may have to sacrifice cultural (or political) equality (and vice versa). For example, she said, if schools are going to provide opportunities for students to gain access to a wide range of employment opportunities, then there is a need to give them access to those forms of knowledge that are generally associated with "high culture". However, she argued, these are not necessarily the forms of knowledge that working-class or minority students can easily relate to or see as their own. By contrast, if we were to privilege cultural equality we would want to make sure that diverse cultural forms were represented in the curriculum (e.g. graffiti art as well as museum art, rap music as well as classical music etc.). This, continued the speaker, would leave less time for teaching the high cultural forms students need to access further education and employment opportunities. This kind of tension, explained professor Gewirtz, creates dilemmas for educators and policy-makers who need to steer a course between the demands of cultural, political and economic equality.

Policy implications

For Professor Gewirtz, **if we are going to take cultural and political equality seriously then we need to rethink dominant approaches to curriculum, pedagogy and particularly assessment**. She underlined that this involves working with much broader and richer models of education and not being trapped into thinking of schools as places where only certain kinds of knowledge are transmitted. In addition to the more conventional forms of knowledge that are taught in schools, argued the speaker, we need to use the curriculum to help students think critically about how they might relate to others differently and thereby contribute to a more just society, one in which diverse cultural and faith-based identities are recognised and one in which those with different and conflicting views can come together to engage in productive forms of dialogue.

Schools, said professor Gewirtz, also need to encourage students, and give them opportunities, to identify issues of concern in their communities and develop the skills they need to become actively involved in trying to resolve these issues. There are many examples of educators developing curricula and pedagogies that are based on such broader and

richer conceptions of education, said professor Gewirtz. However, she said, they tend to operate at the fringes of education systems leaving the mainstream curriculum relatively untouched. One of the main reasons for this, she argued, is that **current assessment systems tend to privilege a relatively narrow conception of education based on the transmission of traditional forms of knowledge**. Whilst both the intrinsic and instrumental value of such traditional forms of knowledge cannot be underestimated, said professor Gewirtz, these need to be taught alongside knowledge about how to recognise and understand different cultures, how to talk across cultural difference and how to act politically in the world. These latter forms of knowledge, argued professor Gewirtz, will only enter the mainstream of education systems **if they feature centrally in assessment systems** – not only of schools but also in the assessment of teacher educators and the assessment of national education systems.

For professor Gewirtz, cross-national systems of evaluation need to be sensitive to the full range of equality goals, the tensions between them and the different ways in which the equality goals are balanced in different national contexts. As part of this process, she concluded, there need to be ongoing conversations across European systems about the strengths and weaknesses of different ways of "doing equality" and balancing different equality goals.

In the second half of the seminar, professor Gorard asked the question: ***Why does it matter who goes to school with whom?***

Universal education, he said, is generally considered important in developed societies for a number of reasons. An educated workforce may promote economic growth and competitiveness, while widespread basic skills might enhance social inclusion. Schooling, he added, may also act to socialise young people, transmit society's norms, and, according to some, help to produce a docile population. Free compulsory schooling is intended to equalise life chances, making learning less dependent upon home circumstances. However, it may also assist families in reproducing their relative economic and societal advantages, said the speaker.

The research evidence on all of these issues – such as whether schools overcome or actually reinforce social divisions - tends to be incomplete and confusing. The conclusions drawn from research, said professor Gorard, depends upon the precise wording of each question, the age and stage of the learners involved, the historical period covered by the research, and the local nature of schools and their organisation. In his presentation, professor Gorard focused on the research relevant to one of these issues in the current context of the UK. This issue is **the school mix**. In other words - *why does it matter who goes to school with whom?*

School mix and attainment

One possible answer to this question, suggested Professor Gorard, is that there is a peer group effect, such that schools with a large number of pupils who are considered easy to teach will have a considerable advantage over schools with more troubled pupils. This, said the speaker, could lead to the first type of school getting even higher attainment for their already-advantaged pupils. Schools with high concentrations of pupils considered harder to teach, he said, may have associated multiple disadvantages leading to lower than expected attainment for their pupils. There is research claiming to show that this is so. Schools in disadvantaged areas, explained the speaker, may have more marginalised pupils (those avoiding or excluded from school), more recent in-migrants (for whom English is their second language), more travellers (or others who make frequent changes of school), more

children with learning difficulties, and so on. These relative disadvantages, said professor Gorard, could be compounded by poor inner-city buildings and facilities, less-qualified staff, and fewer highly-educated and supportive parents. For professor Gorard, in these circumstances, it seems entirely plausible that a two-tier system of schools could emerge with the already advantaged pupils tending to benefit even more from their clustering in specific schools.

However, said the speaker, it is also important to realise that we need research in the social sciences precisely because we cannot rely merely on what sounds plausible, or on what theory predicts. Clearly disadvantaged pupils *do* tend to have lower levels of attainment in public examinations than advantaged pupils. This is almost a tautology, said professor Gorard, bound up in what we mean by "disadvantaged". Thus, schools with high levels of disadvantaged pupils will tend to have lower average results, and this is what we find in league tables. But this is very far from saying that the advantaged pupils would have done significantly worse, or the disadvantaged pupils significantly better, if they had been educated in another school with a different mix of pupils, argued professor Gorard.

How can we research this issue?

The speaker argued that we cannot conduct research that involves the same pupil going to two different schools and then seeing the difference in their results. Nor, he added, for practical and ethical reasons, is it feasible to allocate pupils randomly to schools on an experimental basis. So, as researchers, said professor Gorard, we are left with the far less satisfactory task of trying to match pupils in terms of their relative advantages and then seeing how well they do in different schools. One result is clear and undisputed, stated the speaker: The vast majority of the difference between schools in terms of exam results can be explained by the expected attainment of their pupil intake, taking into account prior attainment and background characteristics such as class, ethnicity and sex.

For Professor Gorard, less clear is the meaning, if any, of the small remaining differences (residuals) between schools once the results have been statistically adjusted for their pupil intake. Some commentators, said the speaker, believe that these residuals are evidence of a peer group effect as discussed above. However, he noted, large international studies show no clear pattern of relationship between test scores and the extent to which similar pupils are clustered in the same schools. Some commentators, he added, believe that the remaining differences between school outcomes represent a so-called "school effect" created by better teaching, ethos, leadership and so on. However, others see what is left over as the product of errors, created by imperfections in testing, measuring, recording, matching equivalent pupils, and analysing the data. The larger the study, the more information available about each pupil, and the more reliable the measures are, said professor Gorard, the stronger the link between school intake and outcomes. Thus, to a very large extent it does not matter, in exam terms, who goes to school with whom.

School mix and equity

Another possible reason, explained the speaker, why it does matter who goes to school with whom, concerns the role of schools in building an inclusive society. Even if the school mix is not a clear factor in enhancing exam scores, he said, it may still be important in helping to enhance a sense of what is just and appropriate for pupils.

From 1996, said professor Gorard, the Council of Europe expressed concern over the dangers of intolerance within each country towards elements of society deemed different, such as recent in-migrants and local ethnic minorities. In England, this concern led to the introduction of the compulsory National

Curriculum for citizenship studies. Citizenship education, argued the speaker, has been presented by the government as the means by which many societal problems can be tackled, by developing pupils' perceptions about what it is to be part of a fair and democratic society. The fundamental influence on pupils in developing their perceptions of what constitutes a fair society is probably their experience of school, said professor Gorard. For him, the intake to a school may matter because it provides the context for creating pupils' awareness of equity (fairness).

The level of ethnic, and other, segregation in schools can affect racial attitudes, subsequent social and economic outcomes, and patterns of residential segregation, said the speaker. The experience of Northern Ireland suggests that separate schools can be a force for even greater societal segregation, and that teachers then become unwilling even to discuss issues of sectarianism with their (segregated) pupils. So, in divided societies, said professor Gorard, citizenship education can actually generate negative results. In general, he argued, attitudes to school, and a feeling of belonging to society, are somewhat *worse* in countries with school systems in which pupils tend to go to school with others like them (rather than a social mix). International studies, he added, suggest that such socially-segregated school systems endanger pupils' sense of belonging, and give no clear gain in exam scores. **Inclusive schools are generally more socially and racially tolerant**, he argued. There can also be peer effects of the school intake on patterns of participation and social inclusion in later life.

Controlling the school mix

If either of the reasons discussed above is correct, then controlling the school mix could be one of the most important educational tasks facing central and local government. "What does research tell us about this?" asked professor Gorard.

In answering this question, the speaker said that the findings here are reasonably clear, if not always politically palatable. **The pupil body in most schools, tends to reflect the nature and cost of local housing more than anything else, and this leads to segregation and ghettoisation**, he said. In order to achieve mixed intakes to schools:

- Make the system comprehensive in nature
- No curricular specialisation, religious identity, and financial or academic selection-Apply the same admissions criteria to every school.
- Places should not be strictly allocated by geography
- Poorer families should have a choice of school
- Area-banding by ability or poverty could be used
- Disputed places could be allocated by lottery.

In the UK, said the speaker, regions and local areas that retain selection to grammar schools have higher levels of pupil segregation by poverty than areas using non-selective systems. Once the nature of local housing patterns is taken into account, said professor Gorard, the least segregated areas are those with no selection by schools, little or no diversification of school types, where choice prevails over the rigid allocation of school place via catchment areas, and finally where schools are constrained to admit a proportion of pupils across all of the ability bands represented in the area ("banding").

International comparisons

According to professor Gorard, there are differences between varying national systems of allocating pupils to secondary schools and the ensuing clustered nature of the intake to each school. For example, he said, **countries such as Germany with a system of allocating school places by ability, have much higher segregation of rich and poor pupils between schools than countries such as Finland**

which have no such selection by ability. Countries with selective school systems, he continued, whether by academic ability, ability to pay, or religious belief, have the most clustered schools in terms of test scores and various measures of socio-economic status such as parental qualification, parental education, and occupation. Overall, he concluded, countries like Sweden, Finland and Denmark show less clustering on most indicators of pupil disadvantage, while Germany, Greece and Belgium show the most. Unsurprisingly, said, professor Gorard, policies for allocating school places seem to make a difference to school intakes. Comprehensive systems of schools based on parental preference rather than selection or geographical criteria such as zoning tend to produce narrower social differences in both intake and outcomes, argued the speaker. Countries like New Zealand that have experimented with allocating places at popular schools via a lottery have experienced sudden drops in social segregation, he added.

Conclusions

Professor Gorard underlined that **the official use of school improvement models has led to an emphasis on the most visible indicators of schooling - examination results – which may marginalise other purposes and potential benefits of schooling.** But, in general, he argued, the lessons from international studies are that the mix of pupils between schools, whether in terms of occupational class, income, or sex, has no impact on attainment. So, we can feel free to use criteria other than effectiveness for deciding on the pattern of intakes to schools. These criteria, he suggested, might include efficiency or convenience, **but we could also try equity as a guiding principle**. This was the approach that led to comprehensive schools in most of the UK.

According to professor Gorard, fairness for individuals, a sense of justice, and social cohesion are as much a product of "real-life" experiences in schools as they are of the formal educational process. Social, ethnic and economic segregation between schools matters, but not primarily for the sake of test results, argued professor Gorard. **For pupils,** he said, **their schools are their life, and not merely a preparation for it.** Equity in schools matters for today, for the range of experiences of each pupil, for social cohesion, and to allow schools to teach important aspects of citizenship without being open to the charge of being hypocritical. It may not make sense, he said, to have a society preaching racial tolerance within a racially segregated school system, for example. Schools, in their structure and organisation, can do more than simply reflect the society we *actually* have; they can try to be the precursor of the kind of society that we *wish* to have, he concluded.

Further reading recommended by the speakers:

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Contact details of the speakers

Professor Sharon Gewirtz
Dept. of Education and Professional Studies
School of Social Science and Public Policy
King's College London
London SE1 9NN, UK
Tel: +44-(0)207-848.31.38
sharon.j.gewirtz@kcl.ac.uk

Professor Steven Gorard
School of Education
University of Birmingham
Birmingham B15 2TT
United Kingdom
Tel: +44-(0)121-414.48.28
s.gorard@bham.ac.uk

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Which Citizen for which Europe? Balancing the economic and socio-cultural aims of education and training