PROMOTING EQUITY
IN EDUCATION

Staff College

THINK PIECE 1
CONCEPTS AND FRAMEWORKS

'THE EVIDENCE IS CONCLUSIVE: EQUITY IN EDUCATION PAYS OFF. THE HIGHEST PERFORMING EDUCATION SYSTEMS ACROSS OECD COUNTRIES ARE THOSE THAT COMBINE HIGH QUALITY AND EQUITY.' (OECD 2012)

Throughout the world children enter schools from different backgrounds, have different experiences of education, and leave with very different results. In most countries the poorest children tend to lose out most starkly, achieve the worst results and attend the lowest performing schools. There are, however, countries that have made progress in reducing this gap whilst at the same time having high overall standards. The implication is that it *is* possible to develop schools that are both excellent and equitable.

The challenge for practitioners is, therefore, to find ways of breaking the links between disadvantage and educational failure. In these materials I summarise some relevant ideas about what research has to say about this agenda, starting with concepts and frameworks. In particular, I draw on evidence generated through a programme of studies I have carried out with colleagues internationally over the last 25 years.

AN ECOLOGY OF EQUITY

Following the lead of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), equity is seen to involve a concern with inclusion and fairness. In thinking about what this involves in schools, we have found it useful to adopt an *ecology of equity* framework. By this I mean that the extent to which students' experiences and outcomes are equitable is not dependent only on the educational practices of their schools. Instead, it depends on a whole range of interacting processes that reach into the school from outside. These include the demographics of the areas served by schools, the histories and cultures of the populations who send (or fail to send) their children to the school, and the economic realities faced by those populations.

This means that it is necessary to address three interlinked sets of factors:

- **Within-school factors.** Research has shown how the use of evidence to study teaching within a school can help foster the development of inclusive practices. Specifically, it can create space for rethinking by interrupting existing discourses and questioning usual ways of working.

- **Between-school factors**. Moving beyond what happens within individual schools, research suggests that collaboration between differently performing schools can reduce polarisation within education systems, to the particular benefit of learners who are performing relatively poorly. It does this by both transferring existing knowledge and, more importantly, generating context specific new knowledge.

- **Beyond-school factors:** Research suggests that closing the gap in outcomes between those from more and less advantaged backgrounds will only happen when what happens to children outside, as well as inside schools, changes. This does not necessarily mean schools doing more, but it does imply partnerships beyond the school, where partners multiply the impacts of each other's efforts to improve the life chances of all young people.

In these materials I focus on all of the factors in this framework in order to identify contextual barriers that maybe be limiting the presence, participation and progress of some of our learners. At the same, there is a need to identify and mobilise resources to address these difficulties.

COLLABORATION AND COMPETITION

Much of the research on equity in education places an emphasis on collaboration. However, as countries throughout the world seek to improve their national education systems, there is an increasing policy emphasis on competition, choice and school autonomy. This takes a variety of forms and the schools involved have different titles, such as charter schools in the USA, free schools in Sweden, independent public schools in parts of Australia and academies in England.

Implicit in these new types of independent state funded schools is an assumption that greater autonomy will allow space for the development of organisational arrangements, practices, and forms of management and leadership that will be more effective in promoting the learning of all of their students, particularly those from economically disadvantaged and minority backgrounds.

This global policy trend is a matter of considerable debate and there are varied views as to the extent to which it is leading to the desired outcomes. In particular, there is a concern that the development of education systems based on autonomy, coupled with high-stakes accountability and increased competition between schools, will further disadvantage learners from low-income and minority families.

In addressing this challenge, the idea of *coopetition* is a helpful concept. This involves, collaboration between competitors in the hope of mutually beneficial results. However, it is a difficult concept to use. Research points to the following conditions for it to be effective:

- **Partners who see clear and tangible benefits from collaboration;**
- **Trust between partners, established through the careful development of relationships between key stakeholders;**
- **Clear goals and agreements between partners; and**
- **Forms of leadership that are skilful in managing tensions.**

IMPLICATIONS

The ideas presented in these materials are informed by these concepts. They start from the assumption that within education systems there is untapped potential to address the barriers faced by some students. Within this in mind, they explore ways of making better use of this potential. In so doing, they argue that *equity is a means of achieving excellence within schools*.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

- **How far do you think the education system is equitable?**
- **What do you see as the greatest challenges as far as inclusion and fairness are concerned?**

FURTHER READING

- Ainscow, M., Dyson, A., Goldrick, S. and West, M. (2012) *Developing Equitable Education Systems*. London: Routledge
- Blanden, J., Greaves, E., Gregg, P., Macmillan, L. & Sibieta, L. (2015) *Understanding the improved performance of disadvantaged pupils in London* (Working Paper 21). London: Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion
- Muijs, D., and Rumyantseva, N. (2014). Coopetition in education: Collaborating in a competitive environment. *Journal of Educational Change*, 15 (1), pp. 1-18
- OECD (2007) *No more failures: ten steps to equity in education*. Paris: OECD
- OECD (2012), *Equity and quality in education: Supporting disadvantaged students and schools*. Paris: OECD