

# SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS AND DISABILITIES

Staff  
College



## THEME 1

# THE POLITICS OF EQUITY

If equality in rights, status and opportunity is the end we desire then equity – the distribution of resources to help achieve equality based on need - is the means to that end. For example, if in education equality means providing every student with the same experience, equity is about overcoming the barriers that limit or discriminate against children and young people with additional needs or learning disabilities having that experience.

### WHY THE POLITICS OF EQUITY?

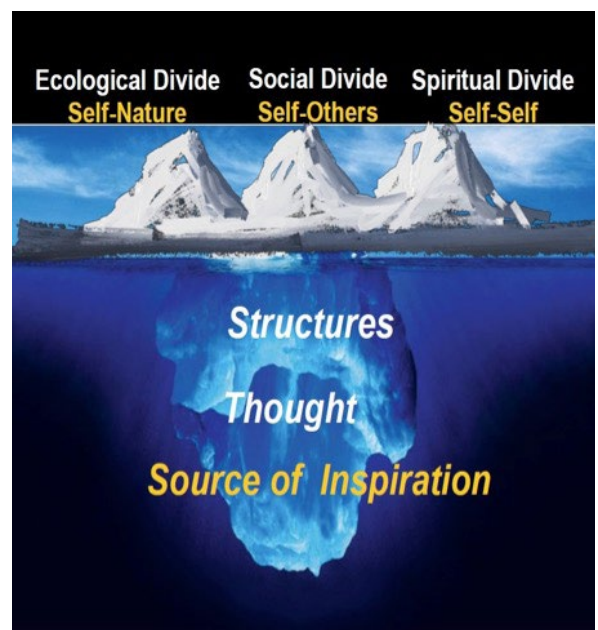
Our proposition here is that while *equity for all* is a fundamental moral obligation, it can only be achieved through political means. Furthermore, the construct of equity itself is highly contested, existing often on the boundary between liberal/progressive and more conservative mindsets.<sup>1</sup> By recognising some of the dynamics that combine to make this such a contested space, we can begin to understand more deeply why, despite great endeavour by many people of good will, real change has proved so elusive.

We use the image of an iceberg, taken from Theory U<sup>2</sup>, to illustrate how fundamental attitudes and beliefs - the source, inform the opinions - thoughts - that in turn, shape and sustain the processes, procedures and structures that have developed over time.

Our challenge is to pay attention to and understand more deeply what we instinctively feel and think about people with additional needs and/or learning disabilities. Do we, however unconsciously, “other<sup>3</sup>” people with additional needs and/or learning disabilities diminishing their status as individuals, citizens and positive contributors to their community?

How we respond to that provocation is likely to shape crucial decisions about:

- **Where and how should children and young people with SEND be able to access the support they need?**
- **The extent to which they, their families, friends and/or professionals determine, e.g. what support they need, how they should spend their time, where and with whom?**
- **The extent to which they should be able to look forward to as independent and connected adult life as possible?**



1. See for example, Liberals and conservatives have different views on equity, but share “protestant work ethic” (Society for Personal and Social Psychology, Aug, 2019) that suggests in the USA at least, there is a correlation between individuals’ political affiliation and their views on the extent to which people should receive support to achieve success based on their individual needs or upon their effort.

2. Presencing Institute – see for example *Leading from the Emerging Future: from Ego-system to Eco-system Economics* (Otto Scharmer and Katrin Kaufer, 2013 Ego\_to\_Eco\_Intro.pdf (presencing.org)

3. “Othering” in this context refers to an instinctive “us and them” mentality, characterised by wariness of the unfamiliar or unknown and a tendency to “push back against those who are different”.

## DILEMMAS AT THE HEART OF THE POLITICS OF EQUITY

A common tendency by anyone faced by a complex challenge or dilemma is to boil that complexity down to a simple, binary, choice - *either* - *or*. Typical examples of such complex dilemmas might be:

*Efficient use of resources **or** personalisation?*

*Fair and equitable distribution of resources **or** provision based on individual need?*

An alternative - and potentially more productive - approach, is to recognise that complex dilemmas of this kind are rarely so simply defined. Rather, we need to accept and embrace the seeming paradox that apparently opposite ends of the continuum can both be true, at least in part. Understanding this allows us to replace “**or**” with “**and**”, becoming open to the possibility in the dilemma above, e.g. that a well-managed and flexible approach to personalisation might facilitate a fairer, more equitable and efficient use of resources tailored to the individual wishes and support needs of the child or young person and their family.

Those in leadership roles will have their own dilemmas to balance as they seek to secure real and positive change for children and young people with SEND. Some might involve reconciling:

- **Meeting national standards and driving local ambition**
- **Complying with the SEND Code of practice and finding innovative solutions to local needs**
- **Reducing cost and improving quality and impact of support**
- **Designing and managing high quality specialist services needs and meeting the individual needs and wishes of children and families**
- **Providing for children and young people with the most severe and complex needs and providing support close to home**
- **Meeting parental preference and building a truly inclusive system**

This short think-piece is intended as a frame for the materials that follow, including connections to other elements in the Schooling For The Future series such as Promoting Equity in Education by Professor Mel Anscow or Schools as Places of Belonging by Professor Kathryn Riley.

Each of the elements in our SEND materials will examine how the choices we make about how best to distribute often scarce resources are driven by our values and what we believe about the kind of relationship there should be between children and young people with SEND and their families with their communities and with those on whose support they depend. They will provide practical examples of where those in leadership positions have found ways to shape the politics of equity locally and to make real and substantive progress towards enabling children and young people to have more choice and control over their lives and to grow into full and active citizens within their locality and communities.