**Equity in education: a pathway to excellence**

**Mel Ainscow, 2021**

‘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. Meanwhile, some learners choose to drop out since the lessons seem irrelevant, and others are placed in special provision away from mainstream education. There are, however, countries that have made progress in addressing these challenges, 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 responding positively to learner diversity, seeing differences as an invitation to innovate. In these notes 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 in the UK and internationally over the last 25 years or so.

**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.** Our 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, our 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:** Our 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.

This simple framework suggests that we need to focus on all three sets factors in order to identify contextual barriers that maybe be limiting the presence, participation and progress of some of our learners. At the same time, 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.

My own work is informed by these concepts. It starts from the assumption that within education systems there is untapped potential to address the barriers faced by some students. Within this in mind, it explores ways of making better use of this potential. In so doing, my argument is that *equity is a means of achieving excellence within schools.*

**Review questions:**

* What do you see as the greatest challenges as far as inclusion and fairness are concerned?
* Is your school organised in ways that encourage collaboration and experimentation amongst the staff members?
* Are there high expectations for all the students?
* To what extent does your school have a culture of inclusion?

**Some relevant further reading**

Ainscow, M. (2015) *Towards self-improving school systems: lessons from a city challenge*. London: Routledge

Ainscow, M. (2016) *Struggles for equity in education: The selected works of Mel Ainscow.* London:Routledge World Library of Educationalists series

Ainscow, M. (2020) Promoting inclusion and equity in education: lessons from international experiences. *The Nordic Journal of Studies on Educational Policy,* 6(1), 7-16

Ainscow, M. (2020) Inclusion and equity in education: Making sense of global challenges. *Prospects*  49(3), 123-134

Ainscow, M., Chapman, C. and Hadfield, M. (2020) *Changing education systems: a research-based approach.* Routledge

Ainscow, M., Dyson, A., Goldrick, S. and West, M. (2012) *Developing Equitable Education Systems.* London: Routledge

Ainscow, M. and Messiou, K. (2017) Engaging with the views of students to promote inclusion in education. *Journal of Educational Change*, 19(1), 1-17

Ainscow, M. and Salokangas, M. (2021) The English schools reforms: competition, innovation and fragmentation. InJones, M. and Harris, A. (eds) *Leading and Transforming Education Systems: Evidence, Insights, Critique and Reflections*. Springer Nature, Singapore

Antoninis, M. et al (2020). All means all: An introduction to the 2020 Global Education Monitoring Report on inclusion. *Prospects* 49**,** 103–109

Dobbie, W. and Fryer, R.G. (2009) *Are high-quality schools enough to close the achievement gap? Evidence from a bold social experiment in Harlem.* Cambridge: Harvard University

Florian, L., Black-Hawkins, K., and Rouse, M. (2016) *Achievement and Inclusion in Schools*, *2nd Ed.* London, Routledge

Hehir, T., et al. (2016) *A Summary of the Evidence on Inclusive Education.* Instituto Alana, Sao Paulo. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED596134.pdf>

Kefallinou, A., Symeonidou, S. & Meijer, C.J.W (2020) Understanding the value of inclusive education and its implementation: A review of the literature. *Prospects* 49**,** 135–15

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

OECD (2021) *Adapting Curriculum to Bridge Equity Gaps: Towards an Inclusive Curriculum.* Paris: OECD Publishing

UNESCO (2017) [*A guide for ensuring inclusion and equity in education*](http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0024/002482/248254e.pdf)*.* Paris: UNESCO

UNESCO (2020) *Global Education Monitoring Report 2020: Inclusion and education: All means all*. Paris, UNESCO.

UNESCO (2020) [*Towards inclusion in education: status, trends and challenges: the UNESCO Salamanca Statement 25 years on*](https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark%3A/48223/pf0000374246). Paris: UNESCO

**Links to relevant professional development resources**

***‘Inclusion and Education: All Means All’*.** This short animation video is particularly useful as an introduction to the importance of inclusion and equity in education:<https://youtu.be/kEyjlqixq9c>

***‘Empowerment, equity and excellence’.***This presentation by Mel Ainscow addresses the theme of changing education systems in relation to inclusion and equity: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ir058B2_Z1A>

***‘The Index for Inclusion’***. This review and development framework has been used in many countries across the world to promote inclusion in schools: <https://www.eenet.org.uk/resources/docs/Index%20English.pdf>

***‘Reaching Out to All Learners’*.** A resource pack of professional developed by the International Bureau of Education-UNESCO. Available free at: <http://www.ibe.unesco.org/sites/default/files/resources/ibe-crp-inclusiveeducation-2016_eng.pdf>)

***‘The Universal Design for Learning’.*** A framework that is widely used internationally to make learning inclusive and transformative for everyone: <https://www.cast.org/impact/universal-design-for-learning-udl>

***‘Every school is inclusive: to some degree’***. During this interview, Mel Ainscow explains international developments over the last 30 years in relation to inclusion and equity in education: <https://youtu.be/oKz09ngdNcA>

***‘Reaching the Hard to Reach’***. These professional development materials focus on teacher/student dialogue as a strategy for promoting inclusive classrooms (available in five languages): <https://reachingthehardtoreach.eu/>

***‘The UNESCO Open File on Inclusive Education’.*** An introduction for policy-makers and managers who have an important role to play in bringing about the change needed to make inclusive education a reality: <https://www.eenet.org.uk/resources/docs/132164e.pdf>

***‘The*** ***Harlem Children’s Zone’.*** Attempts to break the cycle of intergenerational poverty, with on-the-ground, all-around programming that builds up opportunities for children and families to thrive in school and work: [*https://hcz.org/*](https://hcz.org/)

***‘Developing children's zones for England: What's the evidence?’*** (<https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/node/13661/pdf/developing_childrens_zones1.pdf> )

‘***Children’s Neighbourhoods Scotland***’. Takes a place-based approach to improving outcomes for children, young people and their communities:[*Children's Neighbourhoods Scotland*](https://childrensneighbourhoods.scot/)

**Mel Ainscow CBE** is Emeritus Professor of Education at the University of Manchester, Professor of Education at the University of Glasgow and Adjunct Professor at Queensland University of Technology, Australia. A long-term consultant to UNESCO, he is currently involved in a series of international initiatives to promote inclusion and equity within education systems. He is also the independent chair of the Greater Manchester Education & Employability Board. He can be reached at: Mel.Ainscow@manchester.ac.uk