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## Framework for Analysing Educational Equity in the English Education System

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## FRAMEWORK FOR ANALYSING EDUCATIONAL EQUITY IN THE ENGLISH EDUCATION SYSTEM

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### Abstract

*Equity has become a pressing issue in debates about education reform in England, as new policy approaches have been sought to break the link between social advantage and educational achievement. Conflicting notions of what an equitable education system would look like and how it can be achieved, have led to discord at the heart of government, yet what is meant by equity is often unclear, and there are underlying tensions within the government's dual excellence-and-equity agenda. The argument put forward here is that for reforms to have wide-reaching and equitable impacts, they must be based on broader notions of equity and education than those currently prevalent at policy level. To this end, a framework for thinking about educational equity is developed, exploring notions of equity per se, and the range of educational arenas in which equity might be pursued. This framework is intended to guide the creation of a systematic evidence-base about equity in education which can, in turn, inform policy.*

**Keywords:** Equality, Education, English, Frameworks System



## A. Introduction

Equity has become a pressing issue in debates about education reform in England, as new policy approaches have been sought to break the link between social advantage and educational achievement. Conflicting notions of what an equitable education system would look like and how it can be achieved, have led to discord at the heart of government. Most controversial perhaps, are proposals for schools to take on greater powers, especially with regard to pupil admissions, and for the development of Trust Schools which will operate in partnership with business or charitable sector sponsors. Opinion is divided as to whether such moves are fundamental to enhancing equity by enabling the development of 'higher standards and better schools for all' (as in the title of the government's 2005 Schools White Paper), whether they will allow for greater social selection, or indeed whether they will have any noticeable impact on issues of educational equity.

That there is such tension and ambiguity relates both to the contested nature of equity *per se*, and to the dual excellence-and-equity agenda (Dyson 2006) underlying current government-led reform efforts. Firstly, taking the nature of equity *per se*, because equity is a relative and normative concept (Mackino and Starfield 2003), it is continually subject to revision according to context it is applied to, and the perspective adopted in relation to this. This places policy makers in the difficult position of seeking gains in educational equity, while having no single definition or absolute measure of what is equitable. Thus, no matter how equity is conceived within policy, it will be variously interpreted, and may be seen to favor some population groups over others, or to promote equity in some contexts while undermining it in others (Sen 1992).

A clear illustration of this is provided in the government's dual excellence-and-equity agenda, which underlies current reform efforts. In basic terms, since the Education Reform Act of 1988, moves to reform the English education system have relied heavily on the market-place mechanisms of competition and accountability to raise educational standards. One obvious manifestation of this has been the use of national student attainment tests, where results are aggregated at school level, and

widely reported as 'league tables' of institutional performance. Such mechanisms have been intended to create an education system in which excellence begets equity, the belief being that improvements across the system will allow for "Excellence for All" (DfEE 1997), and 'higher standards, better schools for all' (DfES 2005).

Thus, on the one hand, reforms to date have established a competitive system in which there are inevitably winners and losers. But on the other, they have also embodied a particular understanding of educational equity, namely that the more learners who have access to 'high achieving' schools and colleges, the more equitable the system becomes.

However, that there are losers – and most often in the form of the most vulnerable learners and the schools serving them – also suggests a number of far from equitable consequences to this market-driven reform agenda. Punitive measures taken against low attaining schools have left some schools feeling compelled to focus on improving their institutional 'performance' at the expense of meeting the needs and raising the achievements of diverse learners (Ainscow et al, in press). In addition, the national monitoring of examination outcomes shows that, despite almost twenty years of explicitly market-driven reforms in England, those who are most socially disadvantaged are still achieving least well.

As such, despite a relentless programmed of government-driven reforms, the fundamental question of how to make gains in educational equity, without corresponding losses, remains. Attractive though it may be, it is not possible simply to reject an 'excellence agenda' for the fact remains that, albeit it in specific terms, the emphasis on examination attainment does contain notions of equity, and examination results do play a major role in determining life chances. It matters if, as national monitoring systems show, those from the least advantaged social backgrounds achieve least well. But it also matters that the policies and practices pursued in response to such data, do not create or reinforce other inequities in their wake.

Given this, one constructive way forward may be, as this paper argues, to return to 'first principles' and directly address the notion of



equity *per se* as a foundation for equitable reforms. Rather than seek to pursue a single notion of equity, a more constructive approach is to:

Begin with a theoretical framework(s) and a set of definitions that can provide some common reference point to aid in the interpretation and comparison of data (Fouts 1997: 3).

To develop a theoretical framework which could potentially: (i) accommodate different interests and agendas in the pursuit of equity; and (ii) help to develop an understanding of areas of tension and overlap between competing notions of equity, would be of value to policy makers.

A second task is to use such a framework to guide the creation of an evidence-base on educational equity which can provide policy makers with relevant empirical data from within the system. This is imperative, as to have a broad understanding of equity yet apply it only to a limited range of data, could, in effect, restrict the discussion of equitable reform, doing little to move it beyond a market-led agenda. Indeed, in England the current situation is one in which policy makers rely heavily on the monitoring of national examination results to provide an evidence-base for policy reform – and while this is valuable in demonstrating broad patterns of attainment, such data can do little to illuminate issues of equity.

Thus, there is a need to develop an evidence base which can illuminate and reveal issues in educational equity which are not captured in current monitoring systems. This can then be used to inform theorising about equity issues and policy development.

With these tasks in mind, the remainder of the paper seeks to:

1. develop a better conceptualized understanding of equity, and the forms it can take
2. Outline the variety of ‘spaces’ or ‘contexts’ within the education system where issues of equity might be explored.

Outline plans for systematically generating knowledge about educational equity – based on broad understandings of equity and education – which may inform policy debates, and encourage reform in more inclusive and equitable directions.



## **B. Understanding Equity**

To develop an understanding of equity which is suited to the task in hand, attention must be focused on three central issues: **space, form, and capability**. In overview:

**Space** refers to the context in which equity is sought, and this will, to a large extent, determine what equity is being sought in relation to. As Sen (2002: 660) argues, the notion of 'space' is important because equity:

as an abstract idea does not have much cutting power, and the real work begins with the specification of what is it that is to be equalised. The central step, then, is the specification of the space in which equality is to be sought, and... [this involves] such questions as 'equality of what?'

**Form** refers to the characteristics of an equitable situation. For example, is an equitable situation one in which equity takes the form of equal treatment or outcomes; or one in which equity is sought through treating people differently according to their needs (c.f. Burtonwood 1998)?

**Capability** refers to people's ability and desire to achieve a certain form of equity in a particular context (Fukuda-Parr 2003). Capability may, therefore, be subject to access to particular resources, to having the knowledge and skills to use resources appropriately to achieve certain ends, and to social norms and values which indicate whether it is necessary or desirable to achieve certain ends.

In addition, integral to each of these areas, is the question of what issues an exploration of equity should actually be concerned with. If, at a base level, equity is seen as a moral concern, centrally concerned with ensuring fairness and social justice (c.f. Rawls 1979), are there certain issues arising within the education system which are of more moral concern than others, and thus more pertinent to equitable reform? Clearly, it is a matter of concern if vulnerable learners are being effectively denied school places as schools seek to raise institutional attainment. Whether it is of similar moral concern if students in one school have the opportunity to learn two modern languages, while students in another school can only learn one, is much more debatable.



These issues, along with notions of space, form and capability, are given more detailed consideration below.

### **1. Identifying issues in equity**

Given equity's contested nature it is, perhaps ironically, often much easier to identify inequity than to determine what forms equity could take. For example, talking about the context of health equity, but with equal application to education, Braveman (2003: 182) explains:

Because equity is a normative concept, one cannot directly measure equity. One can measure inequalities in health between more and less advantaged social groups. Such inequalities are likely to reflect inequities because they place already disadvantaged social groups at further disadvantage with respect to the achievement of particular health outcomes.

Defining what would be equitable, and how progress towards a more equitable situation could be achieved, thus becomes part of a broader analytical and interpretive process which involves:

- 1) Identifying differences or inequalities between social groups relating to particular concerns
- 2) Determining whether these differences are unjust and thus inequitable
- 3) Asking how such inequities could be resolved – i.e. what would have to happen for a more equitable situation to be created? What form(s) would equity need to take?

A common approach in determining whether differences are unjust and thereby inequitable is to ask whether these are systematically associated with social advantage. For example, Braveman and Gruskin (2003:255) suggest that:

A systematic inequality in health (or its social determinants) between more and less advantaged social groups [is] a health inequality that is unjust or unfair.

This approach has much to recommend it in revealing patterns of inequity between certain social and demographic characteristics and certain achievements. With regard to education, this approach is already





employed in the analysis of national data sets which report a range of learners' demographic characteristics, and examination outcomes.

However, while suggesting inequities, such an approach does little to illuminate how inequities have arisen. Being able to identify 'observed relationships' between particular characteristics and outcomes is not, in itself, sufficient to develop causal inferences. Relating directly to this, Braveman and Gruskin (2003: 255) note that while it is relatively easy to assess "equality... with respect to specified measurable outcomes...judging whether a process is equitable or not is more open to interpretation".

It is when issues of process are considered, that the role of capabilities is raised. For example, Braveman and Gruskin (2003: 257) argue that:

Equity in health implies that resources are distributed and processes are designed in ways most likely to move towards equalising health outcomes of disadvantaged social groups with the outcomes of their more advantaged counterparts. This refers to the distribution and design not only of health care resources and programmes, but of all resources, policies and programmes that play an important part in shaping health.

Thus, in addition to looking at the distribution of outcomes, the distribution of resources in their different forms must also be considered.

There is a further question as to whether people actually want to achieve the outcomes anticipated in a move towards greater equity. In pursuing equity according to certain goals or targets – whether in health or education – are policy makers justified in imposing certain views about how people should live and what they should aim to achieve, which might favor some groups over others? And if this is the case, how far would it be equitable for policy makers to pursue these aims?

The Overseas Development Institute (2001: 2) usefully captures some of these issues when it defines capability as: "the ability of a person to achieve the... the various combinations of valuable beings and doings that are within a person's reach, *reflecting the opportunity or freedom to choose a life that a person values*".



To give an example from within education, learners from traveller communities may lead lifestyles and adhere to values which differ from those associated with the state school system. Monitoring systems also show learners from these communities achieve systematically less well than learners from more dominant cultures. In blunt terms, the question is whether this is inequitable, or whether, in talking about equity, people's rights to pursue their own visions of 'a good life' must also taken in account. And, relating to this, must policy reforms, if they are to enhance equity, aid the development of a system which caters more effectively for different needs and interest groups, rather than viewing these from a 'deficit' stance for not fitting the system's expectations?

In sum, the point to be made is that an assessment of equity should not negate the role of human agency in determining outcomes and experiences, even though, on a methodological basis, this may be considered much more difficult to assess than substantive outcomes, or the distribution of concrete resources. Questions which must be considered include: are inequalities which are the result of choice as opposed to systematic discrimination, also inequitable? Are individuals' choices to pursue a particular course of action freely made, or are they constrained by their circumstances – whether by the norms and values inherent in these, and/or by access to resources? For example, in communities where low educational attainment is the norm, is it that students freely reject the goals set by the education system, or that their capabilities to achieve particular outcomes are not recognized, or indeed, that they system is set up so as not to recognized the resources which these learners have?

Having drawn attention to issues of inequity, the question which must now be considered is 'how might an equitable situation be characterized?'. If an analysis of educational equity is to present constructive directions for policy reform, then it is necessary not just to identify target inequities, but also to set out to some extent what policies should aim to achieve, and how progress towards a more equitable situation could be determined.

## **2. Forms of equity: How might an equitable situation is characterized**

A wide ranging review of literature, drawing in particular on the fields of health, politics and social policy, suggest a number of forms



which equity could take in seeking to redress identifiable inequities. In this, four broad forms of equity have been identified, each with strong philosophical precedents. These are:

- a. *Equity as equality* – This implies that fairness will be achieved if everyone is treated in the same (i.e. equal) way. For example, this principle underlies legally enshrined conventions to protect inalienable human rights in asserting that all humans should have equal rights to fair treatment (Council of Europe; Office for the High Commissioner for Human Rights). Such a definition of equity can, however, depending on its application, also condone inequities in other contexts or ‘spaces’. For example, in discussing citizenship, Marshall (cited Heater 1999: 15) argues that: “Equalisation is not so much between classes as between individuals within a population which is now treated for this purpose as though it were one class. Equality of status is more important than equality of income”.

To give an example of this principle from within the English education system, the centralization of curricula, ensuring that all learners are offered access to the same knowledge is, in the specific context of curricula content, to treat all learners equally. Admittedly, not all learners may be equally able to access this knowledge – some may have restricted access to resources, curricula may be seen as culturally biased – but there is, nevertheless, an underlying principle that all learners should have access to ‘high status’ knowledge, whether or not this is seen as congruent with their social circumstances (c.f. Hargreaves 1982).

- b. *Equity as minimizing divergence across social groups* – This means reducing the gaps between the outcomes achieved by the most advantaged and least advantaged social groups. An important qualifier here is that any gaps should be reduced by improving the achievements of the less advantaged, not by lowering the achievements of the most advantaged (Sen 2002).



Again to give an illustration from within English education, since the late 1990s there have been a number of policy initiatives intended to reduce gaps in attainment by introducing standardised formats for teaching literacy and numeracy. Although introduced nationally, these were intended to be of greatest benefit in the lowest achieving schools, by raising their quality of teaching.

- c. *Equity as achieving a common standard* – This requires the setting of minimum levels or standards that all groups are expected to achieve. For example, Adam Smith spoke about equity in terms of ensuring all people were entitled to the ‘necessaries’ for leading a civilized life:

By necessaries I understand not only the commodities which are indispensably necessary for the support of life, but what ever the custom of the country renders it indecent for creditable people, even of the lowest order, to be without.

Within all sectors of society, this notion of minimum entitlements, and ensuring that people have at minimum the ability to act on their social, civil and political rights, has become a powerful force in policy reform. The government has, for example, set a number of targets for educational attainment, some of which have been developed to ensure a basic level of literacy and numeracy skills across the population, while others demand higher levels of attainment to allow access to further and higher education and employment opportunities.

- d. *Equity as meeting the needs of diverse individuals* – This suggests that fairness requires differential treatment in order to take account of diversity. For example, Kymlicka (1995) has argued that, as a general principle, minority groups who are most disadvantaged within society require additional rights and resources to allow their needs to be met equally alongside those of majority groups.

Again, to give an example from within the English education system, the belief that standards can be raised through

‘personalised learning’, in which teaching and learning are tailored to individual learning styles and capabilities, is gaining much currency at policy level (DfES 2005).

Inherent in each of the definitions of equity set out above, are sets of underlying ideals which refer both to how people should be treated, and to what they can be expected to achieve. In turn, these definitions or forms of equity suggest different ways of judging to what extent a situation may be deemed equitable, and how policies might be developed towards equitable ends. In recognition of this, Sen (2002: 660) argues that the development of equity is, philosophically at least, a matter of “weighting – and perhaps even a compromise – between divergent considerations”.

A further point made by Rawls (1971) is that different forms of equity may be appropriate to different spaces or contexts. He suggests that in some instances equity requires equality (for example, access to equal basic liberties), while in others, it requires that resources are distributed in such a way as to have most benefit for the least advantaged (with this helping them to achieve a certain standard, and/or bringing their achievements closer to those of the most advantaged, and/or have equal access to particular opportunities).

It is also important to recognise that different forms of equity are not necessarily exclusive. To meet a common standard could also mean minimising divergence between social groups. Thus, in some instances, alternative definitions of equity could be simultaneously and harmoniously pursued – while in others they may demonstrate a conflict of interests. It is clear that within the English education system, many different forms of equity are being simultaneously pursued, though the dynamics created by this and their effects on educational equity within the system as a whole, are less well understood.

As such, what is needed to complete this conceptual framework, is to develop a ‘map’ of educational spaces which can facilitate discussion of equity specifically in relation to education.

### **3. Spaces and contexts in educational equity**

The education system creates a particular set of spaces or contexts within which equity issues arise. The heavy reliance on examination-



based data as a means of assessing equity has tended to focus attention specifically on the 'space' of educational outcomes, and within this broad context, on measurable, cognitive attainment. If underlying issues relating to educational processes and learners' capabilities are also to be brought into discussion, it is necessary to develop a more extensive 'map' of educational spaces in which different forms of equity can be considered.

In simple terms, such a map must focus attention on three main contexts:

**a. The context of the system itself**

In relation to this, questions can be asked about whether access to the system is equitable, how equitably resources are distributed within the system, and whether practices within the system are inherently equitable. Resources cover a wide range of factors including, for example: 'professional resources' – e.g. skilled teachers; 'material resources' – e.g. access to equipment and other facilities; and 'intellectual resources' – e.g. access to wide ranging curricula.

**b. The context of outcomes from the system**

Equity issues to be considered in this context include how far achievements are distributed equitably across learners, and whether the system impacts on learners' life-chances in equitable ways. Achievements can be broadly conceptualized in terms of:

- 1) Outputs – this refers to measurable cognitive attainment (generally in the form of standardized test results)
- 2) Personal outcomes – referring to personal values, attitudes, aspirations, and other 'affective' social characteristics
- 3) Opportunities – referring to individuals' capacities to use their experience, knowledge and qualifications effectively to engage in society.

In addition, the education system can have social outcomes beyond the sum of outcomes achieved by individual learners. This is to



draw attention to the socially transformative potential of education, in being ameliorative for families, communities, and society more broadly.

#### **4. The context of the social context in which the education system is located**

The point to be made here is that education does not take place in a social vacuum. Learners enter the system from very different social backgrounds and exit into very different social situations. If these contexts are marked by inequity, this will inevitably impact on the education system and its outcomes. There are questions to ask, therefore, about equity in social contexts and about whether the education system's interactions with those contexts promote or inhibit equity. Are some learners 'valued' more by the education system than others?

An issue which is integral to each of these contexts is that of learners' capabilities. This raises questions not only about learners' abilities to pursue particular outcomes (with this relating to their access to resources – both within the system and from within their communities), but also about whether learners want, and feel able, to pursue the outcomes presented within the system. To what extent are learners' choices freely made, or constrained by circumstances?

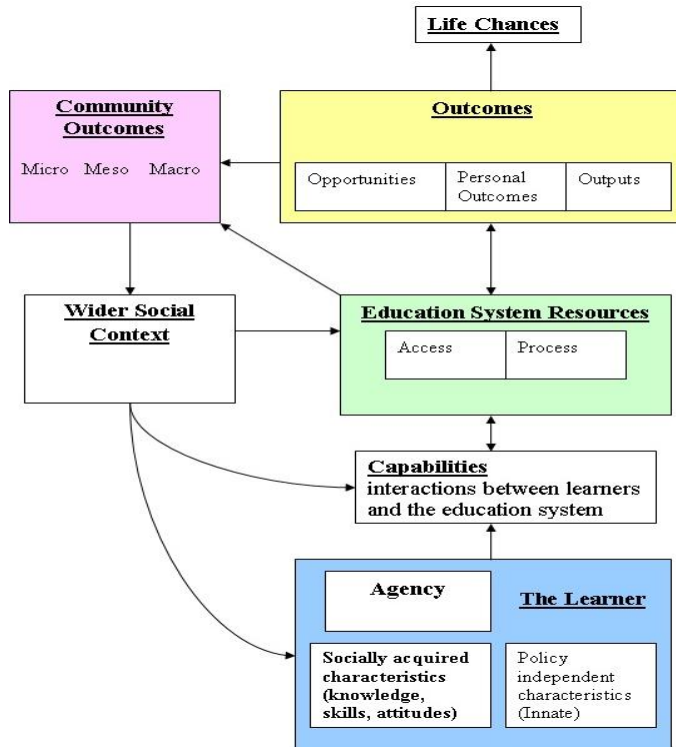
Thus, in relation to each of the arenas set out above, an exploration of educational equity must also consider:

- what learners bring to the education system
- how learners respond to the system and the values inherent in this
- how the system responds to learners and the backgrounds they bring to the education system

A useful way to capture these issues so as to form a conceptually manageable framework, is to present them visually (see Figure below).



Figure Spaces and Contexts in Educational Equity



Having set out the basis for a framework for analyzing issues in educational equity, the question which remains is how to ensure that this can be employed so as to have policy impacts. Key to this is to demonstrate the framework's utility. With this in mind, the final section of this paper briefly raises a number of points relating to the development of an evidence base, which would provide empirical data on the educational contexts outlined above. Such an evidence base, interpreted using the different forms of equity set out earlier, would form a powerful resource for policy makers.

### C. Developing an evidence-base on issues of educational equity

If policy development with equitable intents is to reflect the range of educational contexts and issues discussed above, one way forward may





lie in developing a rich, *but systematically assembled*, data set, specifically concerned with issues of equity in education, which can fill current gaps in knowledge and will be strongly illuminative. This must draw together information from existing data sets and supplement this with newly generated data relating directly to issues in equity in different communities and localities.

To update such a data set annually could then provide information about whether, over time, the education system is becoming more equitable. It could also serve as a basis for engaging with practitioners and policy makers in a dialogue about the state of equity in education. This would be vital to develop a better understanding of the nature of the challenges facing the education system with regard to issues of equity, and to stimulate discussions about how the education system might be made more equitable which are meaningful to policy and practice.

The monitoring process would involve interrogating the educational contexts identified above in the light of different forms of equity. One starting point for developing a systematic process is to pose a set of research questions which focus attention on different educational contexts and issues. These questions would form an overarching framework for data generation, which could be used repeatedly – whether over time or in different educational settings. Questions could include, for example:

### **Learner capabilities and educational processes**

1. How do learners respond to the education system and the aims and values inherent in this?
2. How does this relate to learners' social characteristics – e.g. the knowledge, skills and attitudes they bring into contact with the system?
3. How does the system respond to different learners and the backgrounds they bring to the education system?
4. How is access to the resources held by the education system distributed?



5. What are the processes by which the system makes use of resources?

### **Educational Outcomes (Individual)**

1. How are the outcomes of education distributed?
2. How do outcomes relate to access to resources?
3. How do outcomes relate to life chances?

### **Educational Outcomes (More broadly)**

1. What are the social consequences of education?
2. Is society more equitable as a result of education?

By asking these questions of the education system (or of particular educational contexts) it should be possible to assess the state of equity in education both in a systematic way and at a variety of levels – ranging from individual classrooms to national policy documents.

The sorts of data required to explore issues of equity in the terms set out above, fall broadly into three categories.

#### **1. Numerical data**

There is a need to draw on data from existing statistical monitoring systems, which can be used to identify broad patterns of systematic inequity, and in which observed relationships can be noted. This will clearly involve the use of educational datasets which principally report learners' characteristics (e.g. demographic factors) and achievements (particularly in standardized national tests). In addition, other forms of data, not primarily concerned with education, will be of value. For example, census data uses indicators of deprivation (e.g. numbers of low income families) to characterize populations in different areas and at different levels.

The government also generates numeric data relating to school admissions (for example, the percentage of pupils in an area attending their first choice school) and the distribution of financial resources to schools and local authorities.



## **2. Policy documents**

There is a need to analyzed policy documentation and implementation with regard to the forms of equity anticipated, and the educational contexts targeted.

## **3. Qualitative data**

There is a need to generate new types of data to capture micro-level processes, and issues around 'capability'. This might be done, for instance, through a series of 'nested case studies', which situate learners' experiences of education within educational institutions, community contexts, local authorities and regions, and within the context of national policies. Developing case studies could involve interviews with: learners and their families, school leaders, local authority education officers and national level policy makers. A series of case studies could then be developed in localities with different characteristics and in which different issues in equity might be expected to arise as a result. Such comparable case studies, along with an analysis of national policies and existing data sets, would provide a rich knowledge base about the state of equity in education.

The creation of nested case studies drawing on this range of data, also allows the potential, depending on the populations involved, for the disparities which lie at the heart of issues of equity to explored both across different populations (defined for example, by markers of social economic status, or by ethnicity), and within specified populations.

## **D. Conclusion**

Equity is complex and contested – yet, as a moral concern, it is imperative that educational system moves in more equitable directions for the benefit of all learners. Policy reforms in England have pursued different forms of equity, but there has been, within this, been a tendency to focus on issues of equity in the context of examination attainment. To move beyond this, it is necessary to engage with different forms of equity in relation to a broader map of educational contexts, exploring different



spaces within the education system and issues which pervade these relating to learners' capabilities.

To this end, this paper has developed a framework for the analysis of educational equity. This embodies four broad principles which can usefully guide discussions about equity and its achievement in educational contexts, namely:

1. Issues in equity can be said to arise where there are systematic differences in processes and outcomes relating to markers of social advantage. In relation to this, it is necessary to consider issues of agency, and whether the choices people make are 'free' or 'constrained'.
2. Questions about equity are necessary multiple in their nature – in what ways is a situation equitable?; in what ways could it be made more so? What forms of equity are being promoted?; how do these forms relate to other notions of equity?
3. Different forms of equity provide a framework for unraveling some of the complexities surrounding issues of equity, with which policy makers must engage. In effect, different forms can be used as 'lenses' through which to interrogate different situations, or to explore a situation in varying ways. This is valuable in demonstrating conflicts of interest, and/or ways of accommodating different interests and agendas within equitable reforms.
4. Spaces and contexts which must be explored in an analysis of educational equity refer to learners themselves, the education system and resources it holds, the outcomes of education, and the wider social contexts in which these are embedded.

A discussion based on these principles, drawing on an evidence base relating specifically to issues of educational equity as proposed here, could offer a valuable resource to policy makers and practitioners seeking directions for equitable reform in education.



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