

Education and the disadvantaged

Is there any justice?



TOMMY MAC KAY argues for radical change in the principles and funding of the British educational system. This article is based on his Award for Challenging Inequality of Opportunity Lecture given at the Society's Annual Conference, March 1998.

'E DUCATION and the disadvantaged: is there any justice?' There is a sense, of course, in which that question begs the answer 'No — there is no justice.' That is not, however, precisely the answer I intend to give. Indeed, if you take a long-term historical perspective of the provision of

education in the UK throughout its entire statutory period — and probably for a century before that — you could say that a constant move towards greater justice and equity has been the hallmark of the whole process. Certainly, there have at times been fairly significant setbacks, but in general the process has continued steadily. What stage has this process reached?

How well does Britain, as a wealthy and highly-developed nation, do in its provision of education to the disadvantaged? My answer would be: 'In general terms, not very well; but, specifically, even where structures have been set up for the benefit of the disadvantaged, not very well there either.'

This raises fundamental issues of justice and equality of opportunity. This article argues that discrimination and injustice are endemic in the provision of education and other public services, even in those aspects that are designed to show positive discrimination towards disadvantaged groups.

I intend to do three things. First, I will put forward socio-economic disadvantage as the most significant dimension through which all forms of inequality of opportunity are mediated. Second, I will

TABLE 1 Race, employment and disability (%)

	Afro-Caribbean	Indian	Pakistani	Bangladeshi	UK mean
<i>Unemployed</i>					
Less than 6 months	6	2	4	4	2
More than 6 months	17	11	13	18	5
Permanently sick/disabled	5	4	6	4	3

Source: Whitmarsh & Summerfield (1996)

TABLE 2 Poverty and educational achievement

GCSE league table: Rank order of local education authorities (1995)	Pupils achieving five or more A-C grades %	Pupils eligible for free school meals %
1-10	51	10
11-20	48	13
21-30	45	14
31-40	43	14
41-50	41	17
51-60	39	17
61-70	36	23
71-80	34	26
81-90	31	30
91-100	27	36
101-110	21	53

Source: *The Times Educational Supplement (Scotland)*, 13 February 1997 (from DfEE *Statistics of Education*)

offer a challenge to education in three areas of my current work. None of these has been reported on before. Finally, I will make some positive suggestions for addressing inequality of opportunity in these areas.

Socio-economic disadvantage and inequality of opportunity

When people speak of 'equal opportunities', they often think first of something to do with gender. They probably think next of race, and then of disability. I intend, however, to focus on socio-economic disadvantage as a major dimension in inequality of opportunity. There are two reasons for this.

First, the most vulnerable members of society, in terms of all the traditional areas of gender, race and disability, are over-represented in the lowest socio-economic groups. While the relationship is a complex one, the general facts are well documented. Table 1 provides figures on race, employment and disability.

If you belong to a minority ethnic group, you are three times as likely to be long-term unemployed and twice as likely to be permanently sick or disabled. If you work and belong to these groups you earn less, and if you are a woman you earn less again (Equal Opportunities Commission, 1996; Whitmarsh & Summerfield, 1996).

In summary, the groups over-represented in the poorest sectors of society include minority ethnic families, lone parent families (in nine out of 10 of which the parent is a woman), large families, families with very young children and families with people with disabilities (Equal Opportunities Commission, 1996; Kumar, 1993; Office of Population Censuses and Surveys, 1991).

The second reason for focusing on socio-economic disadvantage is that it is not only a significant factor in mediating issues relating to race, gender and disability; it is a major dimension of inequality of opportunity in its own right.

I am not equating inequality and injustice — they are two different things. Nor am I concerned here with the political argument, coherently expressed elsewhere, that the existence of poverty in all countries serves a number of particular interests. What I am saying is that if a large sector of society, for whatever reason, will only ever have access to an impoverished quality of life, then significant issues of justice arise.

What do we already know about the effects of socio-economic disadvantage? The facts are well established in literally hundreds of studies. They cover the effects of poverty on what I view as the three dimensions of human well-being: mortality, morbidity and quality of life (as described in the World Health Organization definition: 'Individuals' perception of their position in life in the context of the culture and value systems in which they live and in relation to their goals, expectations, standards and concerns').

I have expressed this elsewhere as follows: 'The impact of social disadvantage is experienced literally from the cradle to the grave. It is associated with significantly higher infant mortality rates and significantly lower longevity. The entire span of life in between is marked by poorer health on virtually every measurable indicator and by a higher incidence of physical and mental disabilities.' (MacKay, 1995, p.214.)

Overall, if you are poor you are more likely: to die in infancy or childhood; to

have lower life expectancy; to have congenital abnormalities; to have disabilities; to have worse sequelae of serious illnesses; to have serious head injuries in childhood; to be burned to death; or to be knocked down and killed. In Glasgow, a city with a high index of poverty, children are twice as likely to be knocked down as elsewhere in the UK, and in Drumchapel, one of its poorest areas, six times as likely (Thomson & Whelan, 1997).

What about the educational effects of socio-economic disadvantage? While there are many complex factors here, the general trends are clearly documented, and may be summarised under two headings.

First, as may be predicted from what has been said already, there is an increased incidence of a whole range of pronounced and complex special educational needs. Second, at a less severe level, there are poorer achievement levels on all measures of educational attainments, together with poorer adjustment socially and emotionally to the school environment.

I have been privileged throughout my professional life to work with society's most disadvantaged and marginalised groups. When I first became a psychologist, I worked on standardising an arithmetic test and made these comments prior to most of the literature that was to develop on this subject:

When the results were being calculated, it became evident that there were marked differences between one school and another. A comparison was made between two schools, School A and School B, the former having the advantage over the latter in terms of socio-economic status.

Analyses of variance were carried out on the differences, the t values for all of them being significant beyond the .01 level. Writing in 1918, Ballard pointed to a difference of more than two years between the addition and subtraction performance of high and low socio-economic groups, in favour of the former, and the observation may still be of relevance. (MacKay, 1971, p.20.)

The relationship between poverty and educational underachievement may be simply illustrated by reference to the Government's league tables for examination results (Table 2). A perfect inverse correlation is seen between achievement rank and poverty rank.

The effects of socio-economic disadvantage at individual and at school levels is compounded by what may be described as 'neighbourhood factors'. In the course of some research in a neighbourhood marked by multiple disadvantage, we carried out a needs analysis in the local primary school.

Of a population of 350 pupils, 140 met the criteria for referral to the educational psychology service and 91 met the threshold criteria for a Record of Needs (by which statutory provision is made for individual learning programmes at school for those with special educational needs — equivalent to the Statement of Special Educational Needs in England and Wales) (MacKay, 1995).

Challenging injustice in education

As this article arises from a personal award for challenging inequality of opportunity, I may be allowed the luxury of setting new challenges within the context of earlier ones, and noting some of the risks

involved. I will do this in relation to four examples: physical disability; remedial education; moderate learning difficulties; and specific learning difficulties.

In 1982, I gave a keynote address at a national conference with the rather provocative title 'Physical handicap and special education — Should psychologists co-operate in a national disgrace?' Among various examples of injustice, I noted the following:

Two children had an identical physical disability. Both were five or six years of age. One belonged to Social Class V, came from a 'difficult' family and had a low IQ. The head teacher of the local primary school pointed out that there was 'no way' the child could be admitted. Who was going to help the child across the playground to the taxi? Who was meant to assist him up the two steps between the classroom and the dining hall? ... The other child belonged to

Social Class I, came from a professional background and had a high IQ. He was admitted to ordinary primary school, which, as it happened, was the same primary school. The social class of a child can have a remarkable effect in levelling the steps between a classroom and a lunch hall. (MacKay, 1982, p8.)

This paper received wide and rather sensationalist press coverage, which was unwelcome to my education authority; as a result, I spent the next three years in a professional wilderness. However, it did lead to an immediate review of this area in what was then the largest education authority in Europe.

The following year I chose the title 'Remedial education in an elitist society' for an address to all of the people working in this field in a particular authority. The following quotation may illustrate the general tone.

I believe that remedial education in its philosophy, its structure and its terminology is a direct function of an elitist society. Elitism in society maintains — and is in turn maintained by — an elitist educational system, in which the battle is to the strong and the race to the swift. ...

An inevitable outcome of this elitist education is that it creates large groups of children who fail to meet its demands, and who are therefore relegated to a position of second-class citizenship within its framework, and then within the society whose interests it serves. (MacKay, 1983, p.20.)

This was not liked by the education authority, who refused to publish my paper in their conference proceedings. This was rather difficult, as it was the keynote address; consequently, publication was delayed for over a year. Meanwhile, the challenge was received more positively in other quarters, and three other publications requested permission to put the paper in print.

The challenge to the provision of education to children with moderate learning difficulties followed a survey of admissions to special schools. My statement that 'any structure which, in terms of its admissions, discriminates on all the variables of race, sex, religion and

social class is already hopelessly self-condemned' (MacKay, 1989, p.3) was not appreciated by some strong vested interests in this area. They decided to take the matter 'to the top'; as a result, I had the distinction of being quoted in *Hansard* after the issue was raised in the House!

The challenge in relation to specific learning difficulties came when I was invited to face the chair of a vocal pressure group live on BBC Radio Scotland's programme *Head On*. The whole rationale of the programme was controversy, and I was invited because it was known I had strong views on the subject.

We had just completed a survey of referrals for specific learning difficulties to an educational psychology service. We found that about 95 per cent were from the two pockets of wealth within the education authority, with the remaining 5 per cent coming from the large disadvantaged populations. The pressure group in question was particularly active in the two wealthy areas.

I commented in these terms:

Other pressure groups tend to be dealing with the whole spectrum of the socio-economic population. This one is composed largely of those who can afford the private assessment, and it is deflecting resources away from the areas where help is most greatly needed.

Learning difficulties occur with much higher frequency in areas of multiple deprivation, and when this group presses councillors, MPs and

others to turn attention to one particular sector then it leads to an unfair distribution of resources.

The outcome was that the following week *Head On* received the largest volume of replies ever — most of it being 'hate mail' directed at me — and they introduced the programme by saying: 'The unfortunate Mr MacKay will wish he hadn't got out of bed this morning.'

Challenging injustice is not always popular and will at times involve personal risk. The three areas of work I am raising in this article will be seen by some as controversial — the outcomes of legislation for children with special educational needs, the abuse of power in public services and the structure of public spending.

Legislation for special educational needs

My first new study relates to special educational needs statistics, and is concerned with the socio-economic distribution of the Record of Needs in over 2000 mainstream schools (MacKay, in press). It is a Scottish study, but casual inspection of figures from elsewhere in the UK leads me to feel that the results may apply widely.

First, let it be acknowledged that special needs statistics is a complex field. I have published in this area several times during the last 20 years. There are many pitfalls, and my recent analysis showed that the government statistical service had fallen into all of them (MacKay, 1994).

If special needs are so highly correlated

with socio-economic disadvantage, then you would expect that if you rank schools by socio-economic status (SES) and then rank them by proportion of pupils with a Record of Needs, the correlation will be a very obvious one.

However, when I ranked every primary school in Scotland in this way, using the two most recent data sets available (1992 and 1996), I found the correlation, while positive, to be marginal (1992, $r = .13$; 1996, $r = .15$). The SES indicator selected was a very robust one, namely, eligibility for free school meals.

But it could be argued that the effects of SES would only really be expected in the most prominently disadvantaged schools, and they might have been washed out in the bulk of schools where SES factors are less significant.

I therefore looked at the extremes of the distribution by comparing the 40 schools at the lowest end of the socio-economic spectrum with the 40 highest. When these two groups of schools were each ranked from 1 to 40 for SES and for proportion of Records, the results were not significant in either of the years studied (1992, $p = .65$; 1996, $p = .17$).

The only significant result found was when schools with a roll of over 200 were examined. When the lowest and highest of these were compared, the results reached significance level for the 1996 sample ($N = 80$; 1992, $p = .15$; 1996, $p = .04$).

Abuse of power in public services

My second study was sponsored by West Dunbartonshire Council, with which I have a close working relationship and whose education authority has a strong commitment to equality of opportunity and tackling injustice. The results were alarming and can only be summarised here.

I sent questionnaires to 50 psychologists working for education authorities throughout the UK. The response rate was 100 per cent, but certainly the sample was not a random one. It consisted of colleagues whom I knew and who could rely on my assurance that potentially identifiable information, albeit anonymously presented, would be adequately safeguarded.

The study was in an extremely sensitive area — psychologists' experience of abuse by people in positions of power: MPs, councillors, employers, or perhaps parents who used these people and others to gain unfair advantages. Respondents were given a number of examples of abuse of power,

TABLE 3 Examples of abuse of power in public services

EXAMPLE 1: ELECTED MEMBERS

A parent was not pleased with the level of help provided to his primary school child who was below average in attainments and was 'falling behind'. He demanded individual sessions from a learning support teacher, but was told that this was not the appropriate response and that, in any event, resources of this kind were targeted to where the need was greatest.

The parent replied that he would take it 'all the way to the top'. The sequence was as follows: letter from parent to MP; letter from MP to education department; high-level meetings of parent, psychologist, directorate; promise of satisfaction; learning support service asked to provide the necessary resources.

EXAMPLE 2: FRIENDS AND FAMILY

A psychologist working in a large city authority received a phone call from a very senior member of the educational directorate with whom she would not normally expect to have any direct contact.

She was told: 'A boy in X Academy is about to be referred to you. He seems bright enough but is finding spelling a bit sticky for some reason. I don't expect it's at the level of priority you would normally think of taking up as a referral, but when I tell you he's the son of the leader of the Council I think you'll know the level of priority we're talking about.'

of which two are given in Table 3. As these are real-life examples, some details have been changed to avoid identification.

Respondents were asked to read these examples and to indicate whether they had encountered abuse of power in their own professional experience. A positive response to this question was given in 80 per cent of cases. These abuses had caused them to feel professionally compromised or undermined (64 per cent), to have additional work (62 per cent), to have added pressure or stress (64 per cent) and to feel vulnerable (52 per cent). In 38 per cent of cases, all of these outcomes had been experienced.

A total of 96 examples of abuse of power were submitted by respondents from their own experience, often with key identifying details changed. Even then, several colleagues requested that their examples should not be published, and in many other cases the material is of such a nature I would wish to protect colleagues by not publishing it anyway.

This study was not concerned either with seeking a stratified sample or with determining frequency of abuse of power.

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The critical point is that if something is unacceptable and discriminatory it should not exist *at all*. Any level of frequency is simply an outrage.

The structure of public spending

My final study relates to current government spending, especially on education. This is also a complex area and one that is not my specialist field. So although I have collected and analysed statistics, there is still a danger of some armchair speculation. Nevertheless, I believe that any analysis of the structure of public spending will lead to concerns in the area of inequality of opportunity.

I have gathered statistics on poverty, on grant-aided expenditure on education and on other areas from government departments in Scotland and in England and Wales. I carried out some analysis of the former of these, again with indications from inspection that they are of wider application.

From these statistics, I would make two observations. First, if you rank the 32 Scottish education authorities for poverty, and then rank them for level of grant-aided expenditure per capita for the population aged 2 to 19 years, the results are not significant ($r = -.17, p = .37$). This suggests that, apart from any additional funding for special projects and initiatives in disadvantaged areas, the allocation of funding for education does not take account of real need.

However, if you then look at level of poverty and level of council tax across these 32 council areas, there is a highly significant correlation ($r = .70, p = .0001$). In other words, the poorest councils with the highest levels of need and the poorest

base for collecting tax from their population have the highest council tax to pay. In these councils, vast amounts of tax remain uncollected, and so they become poorer still.

For example, the City of Glasgow, which is the poorest area, has the highest level of council tax. The second poorest area, West Dunbartonshire, has the second highest level of tax to pay. There is a line which almost goes through the grounds of my house. It divides me from West Dunbartonshire — from whose facilities I benefit because it is my local area — and places me in a richer area with a much lower level of taxation.

Implications for social justice
I have offered a challenge to education in areas where I believe there are issues relating to social justice. This is not an attack on the UK education system, on central government or on education authorities. For those of us who work in the system, *we are the system*. It is our thinking, our practices, our contribution, that will shape education policy for the future. I therefore conclude with positive proposals.

First, as regards abuse of power, I spoke recently at the launch of an equal opportunities policy in a very large local authority in these terms:

Every time a person in a position of power asks me to give priority treatment on any basis other than level of real need, what they are in fact asking me to do is to discriminate against the poor; the disadvantaged, those with disabilities, the inarticulate. I intend to name and to formalise this area of

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Statements of Needs everywhere till their distribution matches need.'

Legislation for children and young people with special educational needs is based on a philosophy of the 1970s. It was part of a necessary historical process, but: it takes a static and not a dynamic view of special needs; it is based on parents' and not children's rights; it still reflects a medical as much as an educational model; it is bad for psychological services, some of which are now largely servicing its machinery; it is divisive, creating a division between those with and those without a Record or Statement; and it is confrontational, and has to be backed by monumental machinery of appeals, legal provisions and tribunals. Worst of all, it is discriminatory. It takes a group of children with special needs or disabilities and places them in a separate legal category from other children.

It is time to move on — to move to an education system based on the principle of universal rights, the right to adequate and appropriate education irrespective of need, backed by standards of good practice in ensuring these rights for all children.

Finally, I know that I have offered an 'idiot's guide' to educational expenditure statistics. But sometimes it takes an idiot to see things which are so obvious that everyone else misses them. *There is something wrong with the distribution of government expenditure on education.* This Government has an opportunity to change that, if we are going to recognise and meet the needs of the most disadvantaged sector of our population.

All of this is not just a question of money. It requires vision. Two years ago I offered to Scottish education authorities a 'visionary strategy' for transforming

educational underachievement in poor areas.

I concluded: 'This will be regarded as impossible because it has never been done before. But unless you are willing to risk a commitment to achieving the impossible, you are limited only to the possible. However, by making a bold declaration in favour of the extraordinary the limits are totally removed and the impossible may be achieved.' One of the poorest authorities in the country took up the challenge, and the most exciting initiative I could ever dream of is under way.

This may sound like campaigning talk, but I would like to conclude by quoting something I wrote many years ago.

What can be achieved by campaigning? A few years ago [people with disabilities] in the United States parked their wheelchairs across the middle of Times Square, and practically brought New York to a standstill.

A short time later, as a result of this and similar action, the 'Rehabilitation Act' was passed, breaking down long-established barriers of discrimination against [people with disabilities].

The concerted action of psychologists can contribute to breaking down discrimination and injustice throughout Britain. (MacKay, 1982, p.10.)

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discrimination until it is so firmly recognised as to be automatically built into everybody's policy of equal opportunity on the same footing as race, gender and disability.

I have never had such a positive and enthusiastic response. The enthusiasm came partly from workers on the ground — social workers, psychologists, care workers — who said: 'We are often subject to this form of abuse but have no mechanism to deal with it as individuals.' However, it also came from people who wield power — managers, directors, councillors — but who have a commitment to equality of opportunity.

I have tackled abuse of power by establishing a 'principle of fairness' which can be built into the policy of any organisation. For an educational psychology service, for example, it reads as follows. 'Equitable provision of services: psychological services are provided on an equitable basis to all parents, children and young people, with priority being determined solely in terms of level of need, and without reference to the status or position of the person making the referral or the channels through which it is pursued.'

Of the respondents to my questionnaire, 94 per cent said they would like to see a statement like this built into every public service (none said 'no'). There must be zero tolerance of abuse of power. The only way to achieve this is to formalise and outlaw this area by building it into public policy.

Second, as regards special needs legislation, while we should be aware of the issues I have raised, the answer is not to say: 'It is time to have Records or

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