

'Closing the Gap': Systems Leadership is no leadership at all without a moral compass – a Scottish perspective

Joan G Mowat

This conceptual paper provides a critical analysis of the current convergence of major policy initiatives in Scotland to improve learning and teaching, promote greater equity and close the attainment gap through systems level leadership and change. It is neither an empirical study nor a literature review but synthesises across a range of fields – social justice, poverty, social mobility, school improvement, leadership and policy – in order to cast light on the problem and to inform public policy and practice. However system level leadership is not unproblematic, with the terms system and leadership seen as malleable concepts (Boylan 2016), nor can it be seen as a panacea for all ills. The paper argues that educational policy needs to be seen as residing within wider social policy. Without recourse to addressing systemic inequalities in society and building the infrastructure and support structures around schools, schools, on their own, are unlikely to rise to the challenge. The paper argues for a melding of distributive leadership (with emancipatory intent and purpose) with systems leadership, characterised by meaningful collaboration and partnerships from ‘within – to between – and beyond’ schools (Chapman 2014), imbued with moral purpose.

Keywords

Social Justice, Social Mobility, Child Poverty, Attainment, Leadership, Policy

Introduction

Closing the poverty-related attainment gap is an international quest (Schleicher 2014) which reaches far beyond education to wider social policy as schools ‘cannot do it alone’ (Bangs, MacBeath, and Galton 2011; Mowat 2018). Schools are part of, and reflect, broader societal goals, aspirations and norms: ‘Schools are agents of the dominant society and as such, they reflect the underlying cultural patterns of that society’ (Barnhardt 1981).¹ Child poverty acts as a barrier to participation in schooling and, according to the United Nations, its eradication is a matter of human rights (McKinney 2014). In many countries, schools serve to re-enforce disadvantage rather than provide a route out of poverty: differences in students’ performance are

¹ Electronic source – no page number

largely accounted for by the social mix of students within the school (Schleicher 2014) and the neighbourhoods in which children live (Chapman et al. 2016).

An earlier OECD report examining the state of Scotland's education system makes similar points:

Little of the variation in student achievement in Scotland is associated with the ways in which schools differ. Most of it is connected with how children differ. Who you are in Scotland is far more important than what school you attend, so far as achievement differences on international tests are concerned. Socio-economic status is the most important difference between individuals (OECD 2007, 15).

Yet, school policies and practices and the work of individual teachers *can* and *do* impact on performance (MacBeath et al. 2007; Chapman et al. 2016).

A range of studies (beyond the scope of this article to examine) draws attention to the cumulative effect of multiple deprivation on children's schooling which impacts far beyond educational attainment (Ridge 2011; Dickerson and Popli 2012; The New Policy Institute 2013), extending to attitudinal discrimination (Francis and Mills 2012).

Over the past two decades, international, UK and Scottish Government policies have sought to address the poverty-related attainment gap but, with some notable exceptions, such as the London/City Challenge (Kidson and Norris 2014; Ainscow 2015), it has proved to be largely intractable at both the international (Bangs, MacBeath, and Galton 2011; Fullan 2016) and district levels (Payne 2008; Menter et al. 2009). Within the past decade, 'bottom-end' inequality² across OECD nations has been stubbornly resistant to change with progress limited (UNICEF Office of Research 2016). In Scotland, according to Croxford (2015), the poverty-related attainment gap shows little sign of abating.

² The gap between average performance on a range of indicators and those at the bottom

Poverty is defined by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (Goulden and D'Arcy 2014) as occurring 'when a person's resources (mainly their material resources) are not sufficient to meet their minimum needs (including social participation)' (3). Poverty is complex and multi-faceted and the means of measuring it and its impact are heavily debated (McKinney et al. 2012). Poverty is classified in terms of absolute (related to meeting basic needs), relative (to standards of living within a given context), persistent and severe (McKinney et al. 2012; McKinney 2014). Income inequality is at its highest level for thirty years in many OECD countries (UNICEF Office of Research 2016) and it is known that childhood poverty not only impacts on children's lives in the present, but upon their future lives, on future income, health and skill-levels, perpetuating the 'cycle of disadvantage' (Ibid.).

Poverty in Scotland is less than that of the other nations in the UK and the reduction in child poverty has been greater and more sustained (Barnard 2017). Over the past twenty years, child poverty rates in Scotland have fallen from 32% (1994/97) to 23% (2013/16) and families with children are at less risk of poverty than across the UK as a whole. However, the trend with regard to both absolute and relative child poverty reversed between 2014/15 and 2015/16 (Scottish Government, 2016c, 2017c). In 2012, over half of children in poverty in Scotland were living in families where one family member was in employment (Scottish Government 2014a) and, whilst children from the poorest households tend to be concentrated within specific areas, not all children living in poverty live in areas associated with low socio-economic status (Sosu and Ellis 2014). The gap in attainment between rich and poor commences at an early age and widens further as children progress through the school system, resulting in widely different and statistically significant educational outcomes and destinations for young people (Ibid).

For many, education (and school in particular) is seen as the route out of poverty and as a way of enhancing life chances and improving social mobility (McKinney 2014; Chapman et al. 2016; GOV.UK 2016). However, Brown (2013) cautions that studies of intergenerational social mobility demonstrate that education cannot compensate for wider social inequalities in society (693) and the chances of children ‘escaping high-poverty settings’ are slim (Chapman et al. 2016).

The article contextualises the current drive within Scottish education to ‘close the gap’ within a broader, historical discussion of how the Scottish education system has sought to promote social justice through the comprehensive system of schooling and its policy for widening access to Higher Education (HE), and explores the above issues through the following questions:

1. To what extent have the aspirations for a more egalitarian education system been realised in Scottish education and how might this be accounted for?
2. How has the Scottish Government mobilised its approach to ‘closing the gap’ associated with poverty and how might this be problematised?
3. What are the implications of the above for leadership within Scottish education in driving this agenda forward?

The article argues that, if a problem as significant and entrenched as the attainment gap is to be addressed by the Scottish Government, it requires a focus on systems leadership, on ‘powerful learning environments’ (OECD 2013a) and an approach which combines the strengths of what distributed leadership has to offer with a focus on high quality, ethical leadership at and between all levels of the system, residing within wider efforts to create a just society.

After a description of the methodology adopted to scope the article, the discussion will initially be contextualised within an outline of the Scottish education

system, highlighting its unique features and current challenges. This is followed by an examination of the concept of social justice and how concepts such as equity are framed within OECD documentation. This leads to a critique of historical and current approaches to promote equity and social justice within Scottish Education foregrounding an exploration of the challenge for leadership at all levels of the system in taking this agenda forward, leading to a final conclusion.

Methodology

This article is not a literature review nor is it based upon an empirical study: it is a critique of Scottish educational policy as it pertains to the quest for social justice. The article seeks to synthesise across a range of fields – social justice, poverty, social mobility, school improvement, leadership and policy – on the basis that the problem in question is too complex to be understood through the eyes of a single lens, requiring an inter-disciplinary focus. The article is guided by the set of questions previously outlined. It draws on, analyses, synthesises and critiques a wide range of international reports, UK-wide and Scottish policies and theoretical and empirical articles which are relevant to the quest of addressing the attainment gap in order to inform discussion and make a warrant for the arguments forwarded within the article. It is not intended to provide a comprehensive overview of the field nor is it intended as a ‘state-of-the-art-review,’ although it draws on many very recently published reports, policies and documentation.

A systematic approach was adopted in selecting the literature, drawing on criteria such as the relevance (the degree to which the texts addressed the conceptual framework), rigour (principally peer-reviewed or written by an established authority), scope (international/national (UK)/local (Scottish)) and currency of sources.

Policy documentation was identified through drawing upon existing archives (EndNote) and examination of websites such as the OECD, Joseph Rowntree Foundation and Education Scotland. The documents were classified under themes and provenance and the following clusters of themes emerged: poverty, social mobility, developing the young workforce and widening access to HE; school improvement, social justice, equity and inclusion; teacher professionalism and leadership; and school governance (cc. table 1).

Theme: Poverty, Social Mobility, Developing the Young Workforce and Widening Access to HE [Extract]

International	UK-wide	Scotland
Barrientos, A., Abdulai, A.-G., Demirag, D., de Groot, R., & Ragno, L. P. (2016). Why Assist People Living in Poverty? The ethics of poverty reduction (Vol. Innocenti Working Paper 2016-27). Florence: UNICEF Office of Research.	Department of Works and Pensions and Department for Education. (2011). <i>A New Approach to Child Poverty: Tackling the Causes of Disadvantage and Transforming Families' Lives</i> . London.	The New Policy Institute. (2013). <i>Monitoring Poverty and Social Exclusion in Scotland</i> . York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

Table 1: Extract from classification of policy documentation

A detailed analyses was undertaken of a few key policy documents that were (in the author’s view) considered to be highly influential in shaping Scottish educational policy with regard to social justice. For example, a discourse analysis of the OECD document, ‘Equity, Excellence and Inclusiveness in Education ..’ (Schleicher 2014), was carried out, examining how key concepts within the document were operationalised (cc. Table 2), captured, thereafter within a Wordle (Fig 1, to follow).

Keywords: social justice, equity, fairness

Excerpt	Source	Key Concepts	Interpretation
The most advanced education systems now set ambitious goals	12	Student achievement, equity, pedagogy	A focus upon high expectations of student

for all students, with a clear focus on equity, and are clear about what students should be able to do. They also equip their teachers with the pedagogic skills that have been proven effective and with enough autonomy so that teachers can use their own creativity in determining the content and instruction they need to provide to their students.		(framed in terms of skills), teacher autonomy & creativity	performance, equity, high quality pedagogy and creativity in teaching characterise advanced education systems.
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Table 2: Extract from thematic analysis of Schleicher, 2014.

The wider literature was identified initially through the use of keywords and Boolean search terms using multiple operators on ERIC (for example, ‘poverty’ AND ‘attainment’); examination of websites such as that of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation; scrutiny of archives of journals over the past five years but, in the main, an iterative process was used as the article progressed, following up sources in articles and reference lists.

The Scottish Education System: Unique features and challenges

Education policy in Scotland is a devolved function of the UK government that is located within the business of the Scottish Parliament. According to Arnott (2017), it is strongly tied to the nation’s sense of identity as being distinct from that of England. It is concerned with the ‘public’ nature of schooling (Paterson et al. 2001; Arnott 2017) and is rooted in historical and cultural traditions, in social democratic values (Lingard and Sellar 2014) and in egalitarian principles exemplified in the notion of the ‘lad o’ pairts’ who could make his way in the world (Gatherer 2013).

Within Scottish education, there has been a resistance to educational policies deriving from neo-liberal principles and practices (Wrigley 2012; Murphy and Raffe 2015) and a growing divergence in social and education policy from that of England (Lingard and Sellar 2014; Riddell 2016b;), exemplified in the failed attempt by the Thatcher government to make Scottish schools self-governing (Murphy and Raffe 2015). However, the Governance Bill (Scottish Government 2017a), currently under

scrutiny by the Scottish Parliament, is indicative of a shift of direction as it locates more powers in headteachers whilst also strengthening ‘the middle,’ as advocated by the International Council of Advisors to the Scottish Government (International Council of Advisors 2017), through the formation of regional improvement collaboratives. The tension between autonomy and accountability is clearly evident within this proposed legislation as schools and their leaders, whilst having greater freedoms (such as having more control over the appointment of staff), will be held to greater account for their actions (Torrance and Forde 2017; Scottish Government 2017a).

The conflict that characterises the education system ‘south of the Border’ is not so much in evidence in Scotland and it could be argued that the culture is one of ‘contrived collegiality³.’ Murphy and Raffe (2015) describe it as a ‘collaborative model’ with power being dispersed across the system. However, the advantages of a ‘close knit’ policy community (critiqued by Humes (1986) as the ‘leadership class’) is also its ‘Achilles heel’ – a lack of transparency (often relying on compromises ‘behind closed doors’) and a tendency for an unquestioning stance relating to policy decisions and of the power relations underpinning them, leading to a form of ‘groupthink’ (Murphy and Raffe 2015). This can be readily seen in the circuitous nature of much Scottish education policy in which the rationale for policy often resides within other Scottish policies (and reflects an ‘embedding’ of OECD discourse within national policy (Lingard and Sellar 2014)). The current School Governance Bill can be traced back to the OECD advocacy of school and teacher autonomy, decentralisation, and strengthening the ‘middle’ layer between schools and

³ A reference to Andy Hargreaves

government, expressed through a wide range of OECD reports, such as ‘Schools for 21st century learners’ (Schleicher 2015).

Scottish educational policy is not unique in being increasingly driven by global influences as education systems throughout the world are ‘re-specialized’ at the global, European, state and national levels (Arnott 2017), reflecting an increasing emphasis on comparative studies of performance (Forde and Torrance 2017). This creates a tension between the traditional narratives of Scottish education, its drive to maintain its own identity, and the increasing emphasis on the market economy, competitiveness, performativity and schooling as a ‘commodity’, driven by targets and narrow accountability measures (Connell 2013; Brown 2013; Lingard and Sellar 2014), with HE institutions colluding with this as they chase lucrative sources of funding (Alexander 2012):

The curriculum narrows to what is tested, the summative function of assessment is elevated over its formative contribution to children’s understanding and progress, and the larger questions of purpose and value, which in democratic societies ought to be central to educational debate, are neglected (19).

The quest for social justice and inclusion sits uncomfortably side-by-side with the imperative for economic prosperity as education is perceived as ‘the means of producing the necessary human capital to ensure economic prosperity’ (Forde & Torrance, 2017, 107). Thus, it can be seen that, whilst Scottish education tries to hold onto its democratic principles and values, it is not immune to the pressures that beset education systems globally.

A focus on Social Justice

Arshad (2017) describes social justice as both a goal and a process, the former related to a vision for society in which all can contribute, where there is an equitable distribution of resources and where ‘we can each be safe, healthy and happy’ (3); the

latter concerned with the processes which enable us to realise this vision. However, there has been a tension between understandings of social justice which focus on equal opportunities (concerned with equal access to participation, ‘placing everyone on an equal footing or starting point’ (Minty 2016)) and those which focus on equitable outcomes (in which inequitable outcomes are seen as indicative of systemic discrimination) (Riddell 2016b).

Riddell (2016a) traces how conceptualisations of social justice have moved away from over-simplistic understandings focussing solely on redistribution of resources to those concerned with issues of recognition or identity (related to the respect accorded to various groups in society); representation (in public life, politics, key social institutions etc.); and more sophisticated understandings focussing upon intersectionality (for example, how disability may impact upon poverty, recognition and representation) (14-16).

In examining how key concepts, such as equity and inclusion, are framed within OECD documentation, very restricted understandings emerge with equity largely positioned in terms of socio-economic disadvantage and inclusion equated to ‘all students reach(ing) at least a basic minimum level of skills’ (Schleicher 2014, 17). There is no discourse around inclusion as being a human right (as argued by Ainscow, Booth and Dyson 2006) or related to a sense of belonging and participation (Warnock 2005 and Mowat 2009). Likewise, there is little consideration given to the complexity or lived experience of marginalisation or to the other forms that it takes – intersectionality is not recognised to any significant extent.

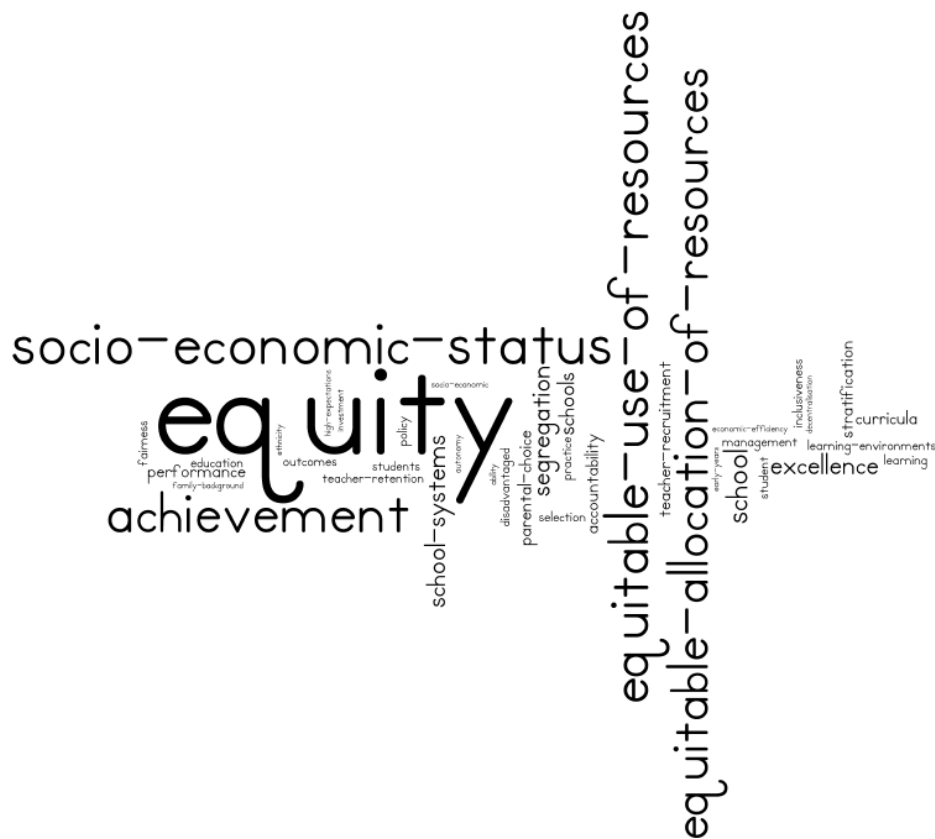


Figure 1: Graphic representation (Wordle) of the themes represented within Schliecher (2014) (derived from thematic analysis)

Within the aforementioned report, there is only limited acknowledgement of the role of wider society and public policy in creating and perpetuating disadvantage. Equity is perceived not as a worthwhile end in its own right but as a means to economic prosperity – even investing in early years is seen in this light: ‘For children from disadvantaged backgrounds, access to early education not only contributes to equity, but is, in the long run, economically efficient as well’ (19). The problem is presented largely as being one of resources, systems, structures and curricula rather than being much more fundamentally about school culture, developing understanding in the workforce, building community, partnerships and creating the conditions under which all children can flourish.

Later reports go some way to redressing these issues. For example, the subsequent (OECD 2016) report’s stronger focus upon cultural aspects with a section

on immigrant students and the two reports emanating from PISA 2015 focusing on pupil wellbeing (OECD 2017a, b). However, the response of the OECD to the criticisms levelled at it seems to be a quest to find even more extensive ways to measure a wider range of indicators (for example, creativity [TESS December 15, 2017]) rather than standing back objectively and questioning its approach and the impact which it exerts on the system.

Towards an Equitable School System

The Scottish Comprehensive System

Comprehensive schooling (introduced into Scotland's schools in 1965 via Government circular 600 (Scotland)), the premise of which is that children would be educated within their immediate locale, was an attempt to promote equality of opportunity in Scotland's schools which, to that point, were based on a selective system (Murphy 2015). It has succeeded in redressing many of the inequities of the previous selective system, in the process doing much to raise aspirations⁴ (Bangs, MacBeath, and Galton 2011). However, the economic impact of industrialisation and social housing led to socially segregated communities (Murphy 2014) and this, together with the introduction of parental choice by the Thatcher government in 1981, undermined the principle of comprehensive education as a 'school for all' (Murphy 2015). Middle-class families are able to locate themselves within the catchment areas of 'high-performing' schools with working-class children often confined to less well-performing schools, less able to take advantage of what schooling can offer (McKinney et al. 2012).

Whilst the comprehensive system has promoted equality of opportunity and

⁴ drawing from an interview with Peter Mortimore

value, it has had less impact on equality of outcome (Murphy 2015). Comprehensive schooling has had some levelling effect at age 15-16 but not at age 17+ where higher attainment carries a greater premium, with the gap with regard to the latter widening in the period 1987-2005, as measured by SIMD status⁵ (Croxford 2015). The author asks whether schools have become more effective at ‘socializing children to know their place in the pecking order?’(198), observing that ‘middle-class parents have been able to maintain their positional advantage’ (135). However, generations of young people to emerge from comprehensive schools are generally better educated than the generations before them (Murphy et al. 2015b).

Social Mobility as a means of rising above poverty

Within the Scottish context, attainment at school is strongly correlated with leaver destinations and employment outcomes and the trend for young people to remain in schooling for a longer period of time has led to general increases in attainment (Croxford 2015); to an overall improvement in the number of school leavers in positive destinations beyond school; and to a lessening of the gap between rich and poor in this respect (Scottish Government 2017b) (cc. Chart 1). However, to what extent are these more positive outcomes reflected in prospects for greater social mobility?

Insert Chart 1

Developing the Young Workforce and Widening Access to HE

The Scottish Government has committed to improving employment prospects for young people (outlined in its report, *Developing the Young Workforce*) through a range of mechanisms such as Young Apprentice schemes and building partnerships

⁵ Social Index of Multiple Deprivation

between schools and colleges (Scottish Government 2014b). Whilst, with regard to leaver destinations of pupils in Glasgow over the period 2006-2009 there is no overall correlation between individual or aggregate measures of poverty and deprivation and all measures of positive leaver destinations (HE, FE, training, employment), there is a strong negative correlation with HE (McKinney et al. 2012).

The Scottish Government, through its 'Widening Access' programme, has sought to ensure that 20% of all university places are taken by young people from the most deprived backgrounds by 2030, an aspect of which is more flexible, contextual, admission policies that take account of SIMD status (Scottish Government 2016a; *The Scotsman* March 14, 2016). This is controversial as some young people have expressed disquiet over policies which (in their view) could unfairly privilege those from poorer backgrounds (Minty 2016). The most recent UCAS statistics indicate the first decline in a decade of university applicants from the most disadvantaged communities (-0.3% points) (UCAS 2018).

Academics at the University of Glasgow established that potentially 40,000 pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds attending 'high progression schools' missed out on the opportunity to participate within Widening Access schemes as the schemes targeted 'low-progression schools' which send fewer pupils to university. For pupils from disadvantaged homes, family background and personal circumstances override any potential benefits to be accrued from attendance at 'high progression schools' in this respect (Croll et al. 2016).

Much of the discourse around the lack of progress in widening access to university for young people from more disadvantaged communities rests on assumptions of a 'poverty of aspiration' amongst working class families (Wilson et al.

2014). However, Wilson et al. draw attention to more recent studies⁶ which indicate that the problem isn't so much one of 'poverty of aspiration' but of the barriers which present to achieving this objective. Drawing from Archer et al. (2010), they observe that there is a greater disjunct between the world of the HE Institution and that of the working-class young person than would pertain to those from middle-class backgrounds.

The Scottish Government has also sought to widen access to HE through its championing of free tuition fees for undergraduate students. However, the group to benefit most from the policy is students from middle-class backgrounds whose families are more able to absorb the living costs of study at university, with the poorest carrying the highest level of debt to fund their studies (Riddell 2016b; Minty 2016; Hunter Blackburn 2017). For 37% of parents taking part in a widening access programme, the costs associated with attending university were considered to be likely to present as a barrier for their children in the future (McKendrick 2015).

While more working class young people enter the university system than was previously the case (Croxford 2015; UCAS 2018), they tend to be concentrated in HE institutions of lower status than those which attract middle-class students. In Scotland, 55% of university applicants from independent schools gained a place in an ancient university⁷ in session 2012-2013, in comparison to 25% from state schools (Riddell 2016a). Riddell argues that 'university participation in Scotland continues to be organised along social class lines, reproducing rather than disrupting social inequalities ..' (28).

The representation of social class with regard to university entry is replicated more broadly within the UK:

⁶ Archer, Hollingworth, & Mendrick, 2010; Kintrea, St. Clair, & Houston, 2011.

⁷ Edinburgh, Glasgow, St Andrews, Aberdeen

There has been no improvement in participation at the most selective universities among the least advantaged young people since the mid-1990s and the most advantaged young people are seven times more likely to attend the most selective universities as the most disadvantaged. (Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission, 2013, 5)

This report speculates that one of the reasons for the anomaly is that pupils from state (rather than private) schools are less likely to apply to Russell group universities (6) and observes that, when they do, the bar is raised for their entry (7).

Within the Scottish context, this is reflected also in the choice of subjects at Higher grade (for example, 18% more pupils from non-manual backgrounds are likely to study modern languages), indicative of stratification of access to the curriculum on the basis of social class and stereotypical assumptions (Croxford 2015). Pupils who study more traditional subjects such as English, Mathematics, Sciences and Languages are more likely to procure university places that hold a greater prospect for social mobility (Iannelli 2013). However, schools in deprived areas are less likely to be able to offer a full academic curriculum and may channel pupils towards vocational subjects at an early age (Riddell 2016b), thus limiting their potential access to HE.

The concepts of educational, social and cultural capital as explanatory variables

Within the Scottish context and within a paradigm of equal opportunities, Minty (2016) (drawing from [Young 1958]), argues that ‘unequal access to economic, social and cultural capital may be ignored within a meritocratic version of fairness, which may lead to greater educational inequalities’ (51). Bangs, MacBeath and Galton (2011) draw on the concept of ‘educational capital’ – ‘we’ve got to give young people all the other things that you know our society values and which middle-class families provide for their children’ (38). They observe that both educational and social capital take time to develop: the fewer connections and networks parents have and the less trust they have in the system, the less information and guidance they can draw upon

and the less able they are to negotiate it on behalf of their children (Ibid), whilst the young people themselves face a greater struggle in engaging with institutions and institutional processes which pose less of a threat for their more socio-economically advantaged and culturally literate peers (Wilson et al., 2014, 33).

The relationship between social mobility and social inequality

Within the broader UK context, Brown (2013) makes a distinction between ‘absolute’ and ‘relative’ social mobility, the former focussing on raising the performance of disadvantaged groups in absolute terms and the latter a measurement of ‘social fluidity’, recognising that as some rise in social mobility, others fall (681). He observes that the previous explanations for social mobility, based on the notion of meritocracy (‘the best will rise to the top’), no longer hold true. He critiques the orthodoxies which have emerged within Government policy, founded on neo-liberal principles and the market economy and on a deficit model of students and families in poverty, which focus on ‘breaking the cycle of deprivation,’ ‘raising aspirations’ and ‘increasing opportunities’ for those from less privileged backgrounds to take ‘room at the top’ (681-682). However, the flaw in the argument is that there is no longer ‘room at the top’, leading to social congestion as middle-class families compete amongst themselves and with working-class families for ‘the spoils’: ‘..what some achieve, all cannot: while everyone can do their best, not everyone can be the best.’ (682)

Whilst with regard to ethnicity and gender, advances have been made in richer countries, social mobility based on social class (in relative terms) has remained largely impervious to change (Halsey 2013). It is not poverty *per se* which impacts most upon educational performance but the dispersal of income across societies (Wilkinson and Pickett 2010). Disparities in educational outcomes (and a range of

health and wellbeing indicators) are greatest in unequal societies – it is relative poverty and social stratification that are the issues. For children from the most disadvantaged backgrounds, these problems are compounded (Wilkinson and Pickett 2010; Mowat 2018).

The Innocenti 2017 report, ‘Building the Future’ (UNICEF Office of Research 2017), highlights that if the problems associated with rising inequality are to be addressed, it ‘requires a focus not just on the conditions of the poorest, but also on the consequences of wealth accumulation by the richest’ (4). However, reducing inequalities is not just a matter of fairer distribution of resources: it is also a matter of ethics (Barrientos et al. 2016) as ‘poverty signals the constraints faced by disadvantaged groups in taking full part in society.’ (23).

The implication of the above discussion is that, without addressing deeply embedded structural inequalities in society and the social norms and values which underpin them, social mobility is unlikely to be realised.

‘Closing the Gap’: The Scottish Government’s Response to the problem

Child Poverty Strategy and Bill

The Child Poverty strategy (Scottish Government 2014a) focuses on three principal outcomes – maximising household income; improving children’s wellbeing and life chances; and improving the physical, social and economic environments in local areas. It sets out a wide range of approaches to tackling child poverty drawing on a multi-agency, inter-professional approach, placing this within a new outcomes framework which sets clear targets for improvement. There is a requirement to report annually with a review of strategy taking place every three years.

The Child Poverty (Scotland) Bill 2017, constituting two components – a set of income-based targets measuring child poverty to be achieved by 2030 and a

reporting mechanism - was introduced to the Scottish Parliament in February 2017. Scottish Ministers, local authorities and Joint Health Boards are required to report on progress using the same mechanisms as above. The Bill aims to reduce levels of relative poverty to less than 10%; and absolute poverty, persistent poverty and those living in households which combine low income with material deprivation (for example, safe facilities for play) to less than 5% (Macpherson and Shaw 2017)⁸.

The Scottish Attainment Challenge

The Scottish Attainment Challenge has a range of different strands and is based on the model of the London (Kidson and Norris 2014) /City (Ainscow 2015) Challenge. The London/City Challenge is not without its critics who question the provenance of the more positive outcomes to arise from it (Burgess 2014; Greaves, Macmillan, and Sibieta 2014). This, together with the extensive literature that highlights the dangers of over-simplistic understandings of policy borrowing in an unquestioning and critical way (Coffield 2012; Alexander 2012; Mowat 2018) should provide a note of caution for the Scottish Government.

A key aspect of the Scottish Attainment Challenge is the appointment of Attainment Advisors who, within a broader national framework, work closely with local authorities and schools to determine local solutions to the problem. There are four streams of funding encapsulated within an Attainment Scotland Fund to support local authorities and schools in this quest but the bulk of the funding has been directed towards Primary schools. The key identified priorities are improving literacy, numeracy and children's health and wellbeing but a further important strand is

⁸ The Bill defines absolute poverty as less than 60% of income; relative poverty as less than 60% of median income; combined low income and material deprivation as less than 70% of median income; and persistent poverty as living in relative poverty for three out of four of the past four years in Scotland.

working in partnership with parents (Education Scotland Website “The Scottish Attainment Challenge”). The work is supported via mechanisms such as the National Improvement Framework (NIF) (Scottish Government 2016b) and the National Improvement Hub (‘a virtual centre of educational expertise’ (Ibid.), the Scottish Government’s response to the OECD report on the state of Scottish education (OECD 2015). It builds on a range of Scottish educational policies and sets out a set of key principles, priorities and key drivers for change (cc. Fig 2). However, in examining the rationale for the NIF and the justification for the approaches advocated within it, and its companion document – the 2016 Evidence Report (Scottish Government 2016d), it can be seen that they draw largely from OECD and other Scottish Government policy documents and reports with very little reference to independent research, despite their advocacy of ‘evidence-based’ and ‘research-informed’ practice.

Key drivers of improvement

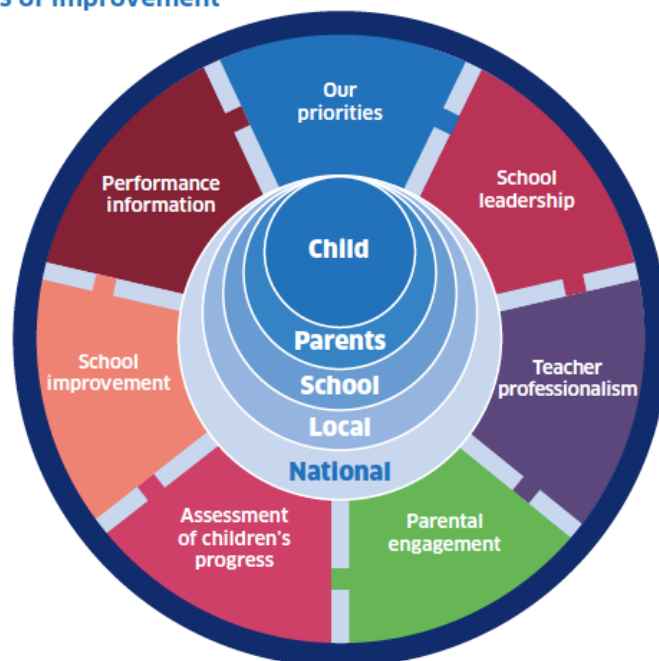


Figure 2: derived from the National Improvement Framework (Scottish Government, 2016, 8) ©crown copyright

A more recent development has been the introduction of the Interventions for Equity

Framework (cc. Fig 3) which embraces the same priorities as the NIF but makes reference also to a further key Scottish education policy – ‘Developing the Young Workforce’ (Scottish Government 2014b) - placing this within three levers for change – teaching and learning, leadership and families and communities.

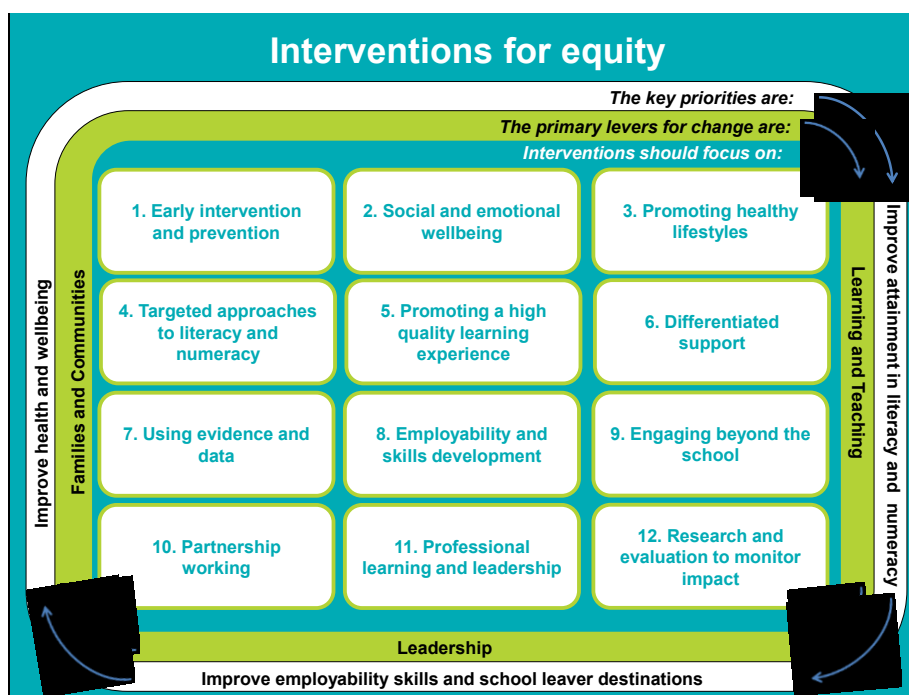


Figure 3: Interventions for Equity (Education Scotland Website “Scottish Attainment Challenge”) © crown copyright

This represents a significant investment in Scottish education but it has been argued that the freezing of Council Tax by the Scottish Government, amongst other financial constraints, has led to a reduction in funding for schools, creating a deficit which some local authorities and schools seek to fill through the Challenge funding (TESS October 27, 2017). Aspects of the approach have proved to be controversial, such as the increased emphasis on standardised testing within primary schools with issues raised about ‘teaching to the test’ and a concomitant focus on assessment rather than learning (TESS, October 26, 2015). This mirrors the concerns of Alexander and a wide range of international commentators, concerned about an increasing culture of

performativity and accountability, based upon a narrow and reductionist ‘standards agenda’ (Jeffrey and Troman 2011; Connell 2013) and, paradoxically (and, it could be said, ironically given their role in driving the system), the OECD in their 2013 report, ‘Synergies for Better Learning.’

Critics of the Scottish Government’s approach claim that the framing of Scottish policy in relation to ‘closing the gap’ is a ‘blunt instrument’ with limited powers as it doesn’t take account of the complexity of marginalisation and the prejudice and discrimination which children face in their lives, nor of the many and varied ways in which it presents, and fails to address the structural inequalities which underlie disadvantage (Torrance and Forde 2017). Forde and Torrance (2017) caution that an approach which reduces social justice leadership to ‘closing the attainment gap on high-stakes standardized tests,’ understood as targeting support at individual pupils to raise performance, risks losing the opportunity to transform schools, pedagogy, curricula and wider culture (112).

The National Improvement Framework (Scottish Government 2016b) stresses the importance of leadership at all levels of the school. Such an approach, it is hoped, will address inequities within the Scottish education system through ‘targeted intervention’ (Scottish Government, 2016b, 10). This focus on leadership at all levels builds on the recommendations of an earlier report, ‘Teaching Scotland’s Future’ (Scottish Government 2010) and is reflected also within the set of professional standards for Leadership and Management, representing different stages of a teacher’s career (GTCS 2012). A wide range of international reports emanating from McKinsey & Co. (Barber, Whelan, and Clark 2007; Mourshed, Chijioke, and Barber 2010) and the OECD (most recently, Gomendio 2017) stress the importance of a high-quality,

highly-trained teaching force and this is particularly of the essence in raising achievement for the most disadvantaged students.

Leadership with ‘Emancipatory Intent’ and Moral Purpose

In considering the purposes which educational leadership serves, key amongst them is a focus on social justice in ensuring that all children can fulfill their potential (Fuller 2012). According to Fuller, leadership with ‘emancipatory intent’ is characterised by a range of approaches adopted by headteachers ranging from ‘managerial identification and labelling of difference’ to ‘celebration of difference and values-based recognition of uniqueness.’ At the heart of this quest lie mutually respectful relationships in which the school embraces and reaches out to its full community (687).

The ‘moral imperative’ of school leadership is stressed also by Fullan (2008) for whom one of the defining purposes of headship is ‘creating deep cultures that work daily on purposeful, continuous learning’ (19). Ainscow et al., (2012) argue that, at the heart of school improvement, there should be a concern for ensuring ‘a sound education for every child.’ (210). They propose that schools need to collaborate together at a systems level with equity at their core. Recognising that schools, on their own, cannot make a difference to the nature and impact of deprivation, they must look outwards and work collaboratively with external agencies and community groups to foster social justice, developing more holistic approaches to local problems. National policies must also work towards these ends and policies aimed at greater equity in education need to be reflected in efforts to create a fairer society.

Glaze (2015) argues that, globally, education systems need to broaden their focus beyond academic content to focus on the range of attributes and dispositions which we would wish to nurture in children and young people: ‘... education is more

that academic content. There are certain attitudes, values, dispositions and behaviours that we should also nurture and develop. Education has to be holistic in its content and approach, addressing hearts as well as minds.’ (9) In a further ‘conversation piece’ (Bradley 2017), she states, ‘publically funded education must replicate the kind of society that we have all fought for. It must develop a sense of our common humanity ...’ (27), which is a clear statement of values and moral purpose.

The above encapsulates much of the thrust of systems leadership with its focus on the national and the local and the importance of networking at all levels but it also highlights that leadership of any worth and in any shape or form cannot be separated from moral purpose.

A Systems Solution

Harris (2010) claims that many attempts to transform schools have failed because they have placed ‘too great a dependence on schools to deliver’ (198). She attributes such failures to a lack of understanding of the complexities of change management and of the need to build collective capacity, requiring new ways of working. Spillane (2013), whilst recognising the importance of the school level, argues for a systems approach in order to move beyond an exclusive focus on one level of the system to examine the multiple components of a system and how they function together (60).

According to Dimmock (2016), systems leadership has come to the fore in education over the past decade and has been championed by the OECD, as represented in the guidance offered to the Scottish Government (OECD 2015), and by the Scottish College for Educational Leadership (Dimmock 2016). Boylan (2013) notes that the two constituent parts – system and leadership – are highly malleable, making it difficult to reach consensus as to what it constitutes. Dimmock focuses

upon the processes associated with systems leadership (inputs, outputs, feedback loop; inter-relatedness of parts)⁹ and teases out the skills, competencies and dispositions required of systems-level leaders. For him, it is concerned with the transformation of schools as ‘innovative 21st Century learning environments’ (75).

Systems leadership is fundamentally concerned with school improvement with the four key building blocks being described as clusters of schools (the structure); local solutions, co-construction (the two cultural elements); and systems leaders (the key people) (Greany, 2017, drawing on [D. Hargreaves, 2010]). The rationale for the approach is to move away from ‘autonomy-high-accountability quasi-market (or neo-liberal)’ systems based on competition, which have only been able to demonstrate sustainable improvement minimally, and often differentially. The purpose of this is to ‘unleash greatness’ within the system by encouraging school leaders to work collaboratively together in partnership, transferring ‘knowledge, expertise and capacity within and between schools so that *all* schools improve and *all* children achieve their potential’ (Greany, 2017, 57). For Hargreaves (2010), it is about decreased centralisation providing ‘a new vision of school improvement’, building on the advances made in school leadership and partnerships between schools (4). However, a major challenge is to reconcile competition with collaboration (Ibid).

For Harris (2010), systems leadership is predicated on the following: it is dependent on tri-level collaboration and networking (the level of the school, the local authority and the government); its focus is on improving learning and student outcomes; and it utilises enquiry approaches, requiring commitment at all levels of the system. Chapman et al. (2016) also makes the case for disciplined collaborative

⁹ For a model of systems leadership as forwarded by Dimmock, see Dimmock, 2016, Figure 2 (p. 63) and accompanying discussion (p.62)

inquiry as being ‘a key lever for change within, between and beyond schools’ (194), informed by the work of Andy Hargreaves and Fullan¹⁰.

Dimmock (2016) claims that systems leadership can operate at many different levels of the system, however, Boylan (2016) argues that it is often presented as being only relevant and appropriate to those at the top. For example, the Scottish College for Educational Leadership (SCEL) positions systems leadership as being at the top of an hierarchy which commences with teacher leadership through middle leadership, headship (focusing on strategic leadership) to systems leadership, the last of which it promotes through a Fellowship programme for experienced headteachers. Boylan (2016) makes the case that teacher leaders (whether in formal leadership roles or not), through professional development networks and inter-school collaborations, can exercise inter-school leadership and can demonstrate a ‘systemic leadership practice orientation’, imbued by moral purpose (57).

In synthesising this discussion (cc. table 3), whilst it can be seen that a common element is collaboration between different levels of the system in order to further school improvement, the means by which this should be achieved differ, as do the arenas in which systems leadership should operate; the underpinning rationale; and differences in orientation and emphasis.

Theorist	Arenas within which systems leadership operates	Rationale	Focus and other aspects
Hargreaves 2010	Clusters of schools	School Improvement and decentralisation	Elements/building blocks
Harris 2010a	Vertical - focusing on the inter-relationships between the different levels of the system	Improving learning & student outcomes Commitment to school improvement	Processes (tri-level collaboration and networking and utilisation of enquiry approaches)

¹⁰ cc. Hargreaves and Fullan (2012)

Spillane 2013	Multiple levels of the system	Going beyond an exclusive focus on one aspect of the system to bring about school improvement	Consideration of processes and how the systems work together
Chapman 2014	Shifting the emphasis from ‘within’ school to ‘between’ school and ‘beyond’ school improvement	Developing an holistic rather than a linear understanding of school improvement	Collaborative disciplined enquiry as being a key lever of change
Boylan 2016	Horizontal - across levels of the system (between schools or at the level of government)	Systems leadership as being imbued with a sense of moral purpose	Characteristics of the leader (orientation and identity).
Dimmock 2016	At all levels within the system – ‘within’ and ‘beyond’ the school – and by a range of personnel	The transformation of schools as ‘innovative 21 st Century learning environments’	Processes (inputs, outputs, feedback loop; inter-relatedness of parts) Skills, competencies and dispositions of systems leaders
Greany 2017	Inter-school collaboration	Movement away from neo-liberal philosophies and practices to ‘unleash greatness’ and achieve potential	Concerned with self-improving school systems based on partnership working and collaboration

Table 3: Key theorists’ conceptualisations of Systems Leadership

But, how does systems leadership differ from the top-down approaches which, in the past, have informed school improvement and which have often not been successful? Top-down approaches have been predicated on an over-simplistic model of change management which pays insufficient attention to the complexities of the policy process (the ways in which policy is refracted as it is interpreted afresh at each level of the system and can be subverted) (Priestley, Minty, and Eager 2014); places undue emphasis on the notion of the ‘charismatic leader’ (MacBeath and Dempster 2009), whilst underplaying issues of power, influence and authority; and, this author would argue, casts teachers in the role of passive implementers of policy, in the

process de-professionalising teachers at all levels of the system whilst holding them accountable. A. Hargreaves and Ainscow (2015) argue that top-down, government-led reforms, focusing on a narrow range of outcomes, do not meet the needs of a ‘digital age of complex skills and cultural diversity,’ requiring more ‘sophisticated and flexible change strategies’ (43).

Perhaps the answer lies in bringing together the best of what distributive leadership has to offer (a bottom-up emancipatory approach in which teachers are able to exercise agency and autonomy with appropriate accountability) under the auspices of a systems-level approach which sets a clear direction for improvement and provides the infra-structure and supports to enable collaboration and networking within and between different levels of the system.

‘Leadership for 21st century learning’ (OECD 2013a) has a similar focus on ‘learning leadership’ which it describes as being located within ‘powerful learning environments’ characterised by ‘distributed, connected activity and relationships of a range of formal and informal leaders throughout a learning system’ (14). It is evident that if there is to be change with regard to social justice, powerful learning environments must lie at the heart of the system, developed and sustained through both systems and distributed leadership.

A cautionary note

According to Bates (2013), differing interpretations and enactments of systems leadership stem from a reductionist approach based on over-simplistic understandings which ‘operate on abstract categories such as standards, as if they were reality’ (38). Such ‘a ‘technical-rationality’ reduces the purpose of education to meeting standards and views teaching as a set of skills in delivering instruction. (39). This, according to

the author, has led to ‘an erosion of educational quality’ with a detrimental impact on students’ learning and teacher professionalism (Ibid.). Bates raises a series of concerns about the philosophical basis of systems leadership which ‘privileges rational planning and control at the top management level over enacting organisational improvement at the grass roots of change,’ leading to power inequalities between those who ‘plan’ and those who ‘implement’ (51). The above should lend a note of caution with regard to how this agenda is taken forward.

At a more basic level, to what extent can governments drive change in educational systems? This question was posed in relation to the *Schools Facing Exceptionally Challenging Circumstances (SFECC)* project (MacBeath et al. 2007). The findings support the assertion that government initiatives can impact on outcomes for children but not in all circumstances. For those schools ‘on the edge’, the force of external pressures exceeds the impetus and capacity for school-level improvement. Indeed, it can prove to be detrimental: ‘Prescription and straightjacket policies can not only prove demoralizing for young people, cast as failures, but equally demoralizing for ‘failing’ schools and for teachers whose enthusiasm for teaching has slowly been distinguished’ (MacBeath et al. 2007: 101, drawing from [MacBeath et al. 2006]). What the above highlights is that systems leadership is highly complex, cannot be seen as a panacea for all ills and may be interpreted in many different ways by different theorists.

Conclusion

On the basis of evidence and argument, it can be seen that, when considered over time, there have been substantial gains in terms of the achievement of a more egalitarian education system in Scotland but there is much yet still to be achieved. What emerged from the literature was complexity: competing policies and

imperatives acting against each other in achieving this aim. It can be seen that the Scottish Government is investing considerable resources in setting out to ‘close the gap’ but policies seem driven largely by OECD rhetoric, which frames understandings in a limiting and reductionist way, and, as previously intimated, are justified largely on the basis of previous Scottish Government initiatives, reports and policies.

The foremost conclusion is that, with regard to ‘closing the gap’, it is unrealistic to position schools as being the leverage of change without recourse to broader changes in society. As argued by MacBeath et al. (2007), the forces upon communities, families and schools, particularly in areas of multiple deprivation, are so great that they exceed the capacity of the school system to be able to compensate. Educational policy needs to be seen as nested within and related to wider social policy. In the view of the author, it is unlikely that the attainment gap will be eradicated without recourse to addressing social inequality and reducing social stratification within societies. The implication of this is that there is a need to examine the full range of social and economic policies which impact upon communities, families and schools to explore the ways in which they either facilitate or impede efforts to ‘close the gap’ and further social mobility, and to act on what is found. In particular, there is a need to build the infrastructure around schools and the range of services which schools can draw upon to support pupils and families, such as psychological services, CAHMS (Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services), family support workers and speech and language therapists. The Child Poverty (Scotland) Bill should support efforts in this direction but it is yet to be seen whether its ambitious targets will be realised.

Fullan (2016) argues that, if we are to create more equitable schools, the focus needs to be on improvements across the whole system: ‘Only if the whole system – district, state, province – is on the move will there be any chance of sustainable gains’ (46). If, as forwarded by Fullan (2008), moral purpose; Fuller (2012), emancipatory intent: and the achievement of a fairer and just society (Ainscow et al. 2012) are to be central to what schools are about, then consideration needs to be given as to the best means of achieving this end. Many commentators argue that an approach which releases the potential within the system (Greany 2017), and which fosters collaboration ‘within, between and beyond’ schools (Chapman 2014) – systems leadership – is the way forward but, if it becomes an end in itself, it will be self-defeating. As expressed in the title of this article, ‘systems leadership is no leadership at all without a moral compass.’ Through the Governance Bill, the Scottish Government is putting in place the systems and structures to facilitate systems leadership but it is important that this leads to meaningful collaboration and, ultimately, systems change which impacts upon learning outcomes for children and young people.

This article has suggested that the way forward is to bring together the best of what distributive leadership has to offer (in keeping with Bates’ endorsement of ‘enacting organisational improvement at the grass roots of change’ (2013, 51)) with the benefits to be accrued through systems leadership with the goal of building ‘innovative, powerful learning environments’ with equity at their heart. However, the problem (and its solution) needs to be understood in its full complexity – it cannot be reduced to performance in standardised tests measured over a narrow range of spheres, focusing on only one aspect of equity – socio-economic status. As such, a much more critical approach needs to be adopted by governments in relation to the

formation of policy at a national level and a stronger rationale, informed by independent research, created for the recommendations forwarded by national bodies in their efforts to address social and educational inequalities.

This calls on the research community to facilitate a more sophisticated understanding of the nature of the problem to inform public policy and to develop understanding of the need to address deeply embedded structural inequalities in society (at the intersection of poverty, social class and schooling (Smyth and Wrigley 2013)) which include, but extend beyond, monetary systems to considerations of social, cultural and educational (Bangs, MacBeath, and Galton 2011) capital.

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