

# Promotion of Equal Opportunities in English Schools

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## ABSTRACT

Equality of opportunities is an ideal for students and teachers, and it is the responsibility of educational managers to ensure that the ideal is put into practice. In the UK, the inclusion of Citizenship as part of the compulsory core curriculum for older secondary age pupils in England and Wales has endorsed the importance attached to issues of rights and equal opportunities. This study is an attempt to highlight some definitions, policies and management of equal opportunities in mainstream schools of England. One of the London boroughs school was selected for in-depth interviews. I concluded that the management of equal opportunities lies at the heart of the management of any educational institution through the articulation of values. The care with which these values are then put into place should be evident through the operation of human resource management applications of recruitment appointment, induction, mentoring and appraisal, and professional development. Equally decision made about the management of the curriculum, particularly attitude to inclusion and expectations of pupils will tend to mirror the importance placed on the development of equal opportunities.

**Key words:** Equal Opportunity, School Management, Policies and Practices, England Mainstream Schools.

## INTRODUCTION

In societies today, it is virtually impossible to read any document about educational aims or goals without such phrases and terms as 'equality', 'equal opportunity', 'equal access', 'equality of outcome', 'equal rights' and there is an immense amount of literature on the topic. Equal opportunity in schools is one of the pivotal phenomena that on the long run; affect the total establishment, consisting authority, public and administration of schools. It is also a complex and problematic aspect of the UK education system (Wilson, 2006; Myers, 2000). Examples are: gender, nationality, ethnicity disability, religion, racism, such injustice are real problems that do not disappear without positive action of teachers and managers to foster equal opportunities.

School is a place where action can be taken since school is a major influence on people's lives, and the practice of equal opportunities in other situations of lives as well. The same concern for equality of opportunity can be seen in the declared aim for the development of the South African education system to 'ensure that the human resources and potential in our society are developed to the full' (ANC, 2005). This study is an attempt to find out first, what we mean of equal opportunity/ies; second, I

have chosen the following main discriminations for this study: (1) Race or ethnic discrimination (2) Gender and sex discrimination (3) Disabilities discrimination and (5) How schools contribute to the promotion of equal opportunity culture and who are the responsible people for such promotion.

## WHAT IS EQUAL OPPORTUNITY?

A general meaning of equal opportunity is the favourable treatment of all individuals in an institute regardless of ethnic, class and gender differences (EHRC, 2013). This topic is quite debatable, therefore no single definition of the term equal opportunity, however, in the context of schools and pupils, equal opportunities can be taken to mean (1) providing for all pupils, regardless of gender, race, ethnicity, religion disability etc; (2) being mindful of difficulties that some groups can face and ensuring that any obstacles of them are removed. (3) Being aware of personal prejudices and stereotypical views and avoiding labels related to these. (4) Valuing each pupil worth (EHRC, 2013). Almost every school in the country

has its policy of equal opportunities. The policy's content is the same as recommended by the Equality and Human Rights Commission. According to the recent Policy Paper (2010), it is compulsory for every school to prepare and publish their equal opportunity policy. The policy stands upon the three strands: (a) eliminate unlawful racial discrimination; (b) promote equal opportunity; and (c) promote good relations between persons of different racial groups (Policy Paper, 2013). For example, Welldon Park Middle School has the following salient feature of its equal opportunity policy. We do not discriminate against anyone, be the staff or pupil, on the grounds of their gender, race, colour, religion, nationality, ethnic or national origin. This is in line with 1976 Race Relation Act and covers both direct and indirect discriminations. We promote the principles of fairness and justice for all through the education that we provide in our school. We ensure that all pupils have equal access to the full range of educational opportunities provided by the school.

We constantly strive to remove any forms of indirect discrimination that may form barriers, to learning. We challenge stereotyping and prejudice whenever it occurs. We celebrate the culture diversity of our community and show respect for all minority groups and we are aware that prejudice and stereotyping is caused by low self esteem and ignorance. Through positive educational experiences and support for each individual's point of view, we aim to promote positive, social attitude and respect for all (Welldon Park Middle School Race Equality Policy, 2014).

The Department of Education (DfE) 2014, highlights that schools cannot unlawfully discriminate against pupils because of their sex, race, disability, religion or belief or sexual orientation. The three previous general and specific equality duties on schools (race, disability and gender) to eliminate discrimination and advance equality of opportunity have been combined into a less bureaucratic and more outcome-focused duties covering an expanded number of protected characteristics (DfE, 2014). Inclusion is not just about placing students with disabilities in to mainstream classrooms. It recognizes that all children have individual needs, and that teachers who are trained to facilitate an inclusive classroom, can better meet the needs of all children (Corbett, 1999). Therefore, from the cited text we can understand that it is a shift in service from simply trying to fit the child into 'normal setting', to trying to change the system of education to accommodate the child.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The Welldon Park Middle school was randomly selected for in-depth interviews to analyse the promotion of equal opportunities more thoroughly and generalize the situation to other Local Educational Authorities (LEAs). My interviewees were; head teacher, deputy head, parent

governors and class teachers of the above said multicultural school of London Borough. My selection of interviews was based on the nature of the present inquiry and socio-cultural constraints in mind. The methodology analysis of the interview data was content and theme analysis as it is part of qualitative research, to identify emerging themes from the data, rather than predict what themes will occur before the analysis. I chose a small sample size as Denscombe (2007) holds that a small sample can be accurate but serious efforts must be made to achieve representativeness. The sample of this study was necessarily limited. However, by carefully selecting a balanced and representative sample I collected reliable, comprehensive and accurate data.

## **ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Race or Ethnic Discrimination**

The Race Relation Act 1976 adheres to its obligation under the Race Relations Amendment Act 2000, that racism will not be tolerated at individual or institutional levels in processes, attitudes or behaviours (Equal Opportunity Commission Report, 2012). The report further engraves that there is also a continuing requirement for school to review their list of functions and policies in every three years' time. Race and equality policies referred to how a school intends to prevent racial discrimination in promoting of equal opportunities for good race relations across a school's activities,

The governing body of the sample school and the head teacher ensure that the school complies with all relevant equalities legislation for race equality and diversity and the related procedures and strategies are implemented with the awareness raising for all staff and school governors. However, the head teacher and the deputy head are more responsible in this regard for day to day problems (Interview, Deputy Head). Race equality is the right of all pupils to receive the best education, the school can provide, with access to all educational activities organized by the school (Race Equality Policy, 2014). We do not tolerate any forms of racism or racist behaviour, anti-racist policy is also supported by the governing body in so doing. If any racist incident occurs we act immediately to prevent any repetition of the incident in future (Interview, Head teacher). However, the deputy head added that the school has never faced such incident since the last decade. The reason is that our multicultural colleagues encourage the environment of equality in the school premises and our students are very young and they enjoy multicultural classroom environment (Interview, Year 4 Class Teacher).

A question might be arises; what are the sources through which one understands that the school is following the equal opportunity policy? The answer could be that equal

opportunities can be well understood by studying the admission criteria of a school policy and how it is patronized and managed. Lewis and Habeshaw (2010) also suggested the school policy regarding equal opportunity can be really judged in their admission procedure. Teachers often may have prospect of the abilities of particular groups of students. For example, they may expect white applicants to be more able than the black applicants or girls to be more studious than boys. When applicants are interviewed, these expectations may influence the sort of questions asked and how these answers are interpreted. Now it depends on the school how they are fair in the promotion of equal opportunity policy. Usually it is pinpointed by the people that the schools are not giving them fair chance to the minorities that causes low percentage of minorities' enrolment in schools and later in higher education. Parents also complain that their children are reluctant to go to school because of their teacher discrimination (Interview, Parent Governor). But the real issue of unfair practice commence from the very base level that is, schools which further develop the discrimination to higher level. As a result, students leave or change the school. Now some say many minorities do not get a fair chance to higher education because of poor educational opportunities. To that I say everyone has a choice, if you go to a school, or went to a school that denies your academic opportunities because of race or economic status, and then I am simply suggesting you to change school. Why should we help the school? You are attending by remaining enrolled just so you may receive terrible education (Interview, Head teacher).

The head teacher further highlights the white and black students' discrimination;

My second point is that white people are not the smartest people in school and are not the top 4% or higher in every school. It's just the white people get the grades – many minorities act as if its racism, but it's not. My school was 99.99% white, but our school hero was a black student with a 4.35 GPA. He has a third high GPA in my class; do you think he is complaining that he got a bum deal? The answer is No; he just worked very hard like me and just like every student. Our School's result has nothing to do with race or colour: it has it do with grades and the quality of people. We need global multicultural schools where everyone is helping and cooperative to every fellow, we need white people helping black and black people helping white, the same we expect from the other ethnic groups. Everyone help each other in the school environment that encourages students outside the school too. Every child is equal in terms of ability (Interview, head teacher).

### **Gender and Sex Discrimination**

The development of equality of opportunity between the

sexes in schools owes much to the legal requirements placed on educational establishments by the Sex Discrimination Act 1975 (Ofsted, 2014). This provides a clear framework for equal treatment for girls and boys and has produced major challenges in the practice of schools such as; in relation to access to the main curriculum and co-curricular activities. Many schools now have equal opportunity policy statements and are trying to reduce some aspects of their organization and culture which might treat girls or boys unfairly or inappropriately, and might hinder the educational achievement and personal development of either sex (Ofsted, 2014). The term 'gender issues' refers to the social and educational aspects of the pupils; being boy or girl, to the real and perceived biological genetic, cultural, educational and indeed lifelong implication of their gender (Francis and Skelton, 2011). Boys and girls are not only physically different from each other but also intellectually.

In recent years boys have made lesser improvement than girls in English, Maths and Science, but this does not justify generalized statements about 'boys' and 'girls' achievements over the whole curriculum. The school needs to examine trends of achievements in particular subjects, and even in aspects of some subjects, such as measurement and computation in mathematics. It should be remembered, too, that boys and girls alike are found at all levels of performance, for example getting off to a poor start in a subject or achieving highly in it (Weiner, 2005). Sometimes the attitude of a school staff and pupils contribute to the gender stereotypes attributed to different subjects. Freeman (2006) argues that most science teachers expect girls to produce a conscious neat work, but not to understand what they are writing about, whereas boys are seen as having a good grasp of science, but produced untidy work'. Subjects or areas can thus become stereotyped as 'feminine' or 'masculine' making it increasingly difficult for pupils to make known as 'a typical' performance. Such preferences of gender should be avoided and the schools can make efforts to use set criteria which do not disadvantage either sex (Freeman, 2006).

When we look at the gender issues on primary and middle levels, it is hard to avoid the ways in which girls are disadvantaged. Many people believe that science and technology does not cater for girls, as it is incompatible with girls learning processes (Mior and Mior, 2008). This disadvantage continues with cultural and societal influences that conflict with their care-giving role tend to discourage girls from studying science and technology, and instead promote family responsibilities and less intellectual subjects (Thomas, 1999).

As a result, girls are being influenced by these notions even in the early years, often resulting in the lack of confidence in the science and technology area, which in turn prevents future participation in this field.

Nevertheless, Schemes such as Girls into Science and Technology (GIST) were devised as 'remedies' to girls' early socialisation (Thomas, 1999). Such planning for girls to be a scientist because of society's rigid perspectives as to which subjects are to be taught to boys (such as Mathematics, Statistics, Natural Sciences) and which to girls (such as Art, Literature, Biological Sciences). This seems to be underpinned by the view, that these professional subjects will take a long time to be completed (Francis, 2005).

Furthermore, research has shown that in primary and middle schools, science and technology classrooms, boys are encouraged far more than girls, as well as being given more time and attention (Thomas, 1999; Mior and Mior, 2008; Francis and Skelton, 2011). The disadvantage faced by the girls also affects and is present in numerous other subjects and aspects of society. It is also evidence that usually girls are the high achiever and hardworking than the boys (Mior and Mior, 2008). The reason behind this is because girls are very conscious about their study and want to be appreciated by the teachers and parents. Girls in primary and middle schools are very keen regarding their study too. They enjoy classwork and home work and are fully attentive during lessons. This is one of the reasons for their good performance (Interview, Year 5 Class Teacher). Although most of the teachers believe that they treated girls and boys equally, however Skelton (2001a, 2001b) argue that teachers often exhibit differential behaviour even though circumstances do not warrant it.

The teacher's sex seems to have little bearing on the outcome; it is the sex of the student that seems to make a difference (Skelton, 2001a; 2001b). For example, male students receive more of the teacher's attention (acceptance, praise, criticism and remediation) and are given more time to talk in class from pre-school through college (Sadkar and Sadkar, 1986; Francis and Skelton, 2012; 2005). Some researchers (Francis and Skelton, 2005) suggest that differences in treatment contribute to girls' lower self-esteem and confidence and reduce risk taking (Weiner, 2005). However, in the UK and in number of other countries the debate has turned from concerns about equal opportunity for girls, to one where the focus is on the relative underachievement of boys (Epstein et al., 1998). The context for this is complex, and relative changes should not lead to simplistic conclusions. Just one factor that might be taken into account that historically girls consistently outperformed boys at the eleven-plus examination when results were deliberately skewed to the advantage of the girls to ensure that the numbers of girls who passed were roughly equal to the number of boys (Epstein et al., 1998). Teachers, head teachers and schools managers can play an important role to convey such messages through hidden curriculum that English subject is not only a favourite for girls and science for boys, respectively. Tackling gender issues at

the primary and middle school is vital, as it develops early and quickly. Gender stereotyping still occurs throughout the adult world as well as, both in primary and secondary level. Giving our children confidence, as individuals will equip them to recognise and challenge gender inequalities and stereotyping, and will thus give them the widest range of opportunities in life.

### Disability Discrimination

Education, healthcare, social and mental health services often define and classify disability, for example, physical, learning and reading disabilities (special educational needs). To help to define someone's disability, at least one of the following must be badly affected: mobility, manual dexterity; physical co-ordination; continence; ability to lift, carry or move everyday objects; speech, hearing; or eyesight; memory or ability to concentrate, learn or understand; understanding the risk of the physical danger (Myers, 2000). The Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) 1995 to 2005 introduced some new duties on local education authorities (LEA) and schools in relation to disabled pupils and prospective pupils; that a person has a disability if s/he has physical or mental impairment that has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on his or her ability to carry out normal day to day activities. The main duties are not to treat disabled pupils less favourably and to take reasonable steps to avoid putting disabled pupils at the substantial disadvantage (EHRC, 2013). Disabled people are also a part of our community and they have the same right as able-bodied people may have in the school or the society. To bring about the society in which all disabled people can participate as full citizens it is important to give them equal rights. So, the DDA enhanced the importance of disabled students that governing bodies to ensure that personnel practices in their school take full account of these new legal requirements. Furthermore there should be well established arrangements for promoting diversity in schools to avoid discrimination against disabled pupils when they apply for admission. They take all reasonable steps to ensure that the school environment gives access to people with disabilities (EHRC, 2013). In this regard, the Disability Rights Commission mentioned the following responsibilities on LEAs to encourage in their schools: (1) to work towards the elimination of discrimination against disabled students; (2) to promote equalization of opportunities for disabled students; (3) to encourage good practice in the treatment of disabled students and (4) to advise the school on the working of disability legislation (EHRC, 2013). Therefore, to help the students with their disability and special educational needs, the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act (SENDA) 2001 strengthened the mainstream of education for disabled pupils. However how to access those measures that need our disabled

students? Is our LEA providing sufficient funds to the schools to help them to improve children with disabilities and special educational needs SEN (for example, the installation of lifts, stair-lifts, ramps projects to make mainstream schools more accessible to and toilets, carpeting and acoustic and tiling of classrooms). All mainstream schools are eligible for support under the SAI (Frith and Mahony (2013).

In schools extra help or equipment (auxiliary aids and services) are provided by the LEA following an assessment of the disabled person's needs (Khattak, 2013).

For the provision of assessment to SEN students, experienced learning assistants are working in the LEA schools. Where there are severe learning and emotional SEN students the school providing special trained and experienced SEN individual assistance and counselling (Interview, Headteacher).

As far as the measurement of equal opportunities for disabled students in school is concerned, we can use Ofsted inspection data to gauge how well schools cater for all their pupils. Guidance which has been issued to inspectors and schools on 'Evaluating Educational Inclusion' strengthens the focus on inclusion as an integral part of the school effectiveness (Khattak, 2013). Ofsted is monitoring the impact of the new inclusion framework introduced by the SENDA and submit their report on; how the schools and local education authorities are implementing the new disability planning duty towards the end of 2004.

The SEN and Disability Tribunal hear complaints about disability discrimination in education, except those related to permanent exclusions at the LEA maintained schools and admissions to maintained schools. The SEN and Disability Tribunal will be able to order such remedy as it sees fit except financial compensations (Frith and Mahony, 2013).

Our school is promoting the inclusion of the disabled children in their admission arrangements and in all aspects of school life (Interview, Year 3 Teacher). Every school must have an accessibility plan, how they intend to improve accessibility for disabled pupils.

The plan must be available in print for parents view with clear indication of the following accessibilities for the disabled students:

1. Adjustments that would help disabled children have better access to the curriculum.
2. Changes to teaching learning arrangements.
3. Classroom organization.
4. Time tabling.
5. Support from other pupils (Disability Commission).
6. Anti-Discrimination Board further secure the rights of disabled people, their responsibilities include policy developing research and advised on standards (Anti-Discrimination Board, Khattak, 2013).

## PROMOTION OF EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES

The promotion of equal opportunity in the school environment is the need of every multicultural society as well as school. However, every society and school has their means of equal opportunities. Middlewood and Lumby (1998) explained that the concept of the equal opportunity within existing schools system should be different from the more radical concept of equality. The idea of equal opportunities may be interpreted in different ways and raises questions; does the promotion of equal opportunity mean all students are treated the same or according to their individual need? Does the later imply treating some more favourably than others to overcome previous and/or current disadvantages?

However, Leicester (1996), Frith and Mahony (2013) implicitly recognise these questions and differentiates gradations of meaning of the phrase equal opportunities, the most radical of which addresses the issues of treating some more favourably than others implying use of social engineering, including positive discrimination.

The other meaning of equal opportunities would imply treating all staff and pupils the same and would therefore aim to improve the status quo rather than attempt more radical change. Treating people equally include: equal opportunities as removing unfair barriers such as direct discrimination or ensuring physical access in the case of disabled; promoting equal opportunities increasing ability and motivation, for example, through the provision of access courses in higher education, the provision of more nursery places in deprived areas or the recent provision of Education Maintenance Grants for students in financial need who are over 16 and in full time education and promoting equal opportunities through the development of respect for all including those groups who may experience discrimination. In schools, this promotion of equal opportunities is likely to imply at least some curriculum development (Policy Paper, 2013). The promotion of equal opportunities is the responsibility of every single individual who is related to this teaching and learning process like: head teacher, teachers, learning assistants, managers can play an important role in this regard (Interview, Year 5 Teacher).

According to Coleman (2009), managers of the schools can play a significant role in implementing and managing equal opportunities, managers in schools most obviously take note of any statutory requirements, but will also be aware of the responsibility to lead on moral issues as they relate to both students and staff through the values transmitted via management and leadership decisions. Management and leadership have more impact on equal opportunities in number of ways: through nurturing a culture of equal opportunities; through planning and development of a specific policy on equal opportunities; through human resource management policy and their implementation and through the

management of the curriculum, including the hidden curriculum (Bush and Bell, 2009).

The establishment of equal opportunities culture within a school may be a bold step to bring such wider change in the school culture of the school. Every community has traditions, values ethics so the establishment of such culture means that the school equal opportunity policy gives a proper means of expression and celebrations to every community. The sample school has no such policy to celebrate culture or religious events of other communities like *Dewali* or *Eid* etc. Usually, the attendance of such community students is low on that particular day (Interview, Parent Governor). However, it was encouraging step of the school for promoting equal opportunities, because Equality and Human Rights Commission appreciates LEAs, schools and individual teacher efforts who are developing strategies to eliminate discrimination and promote equal opportunity in the school environment. Gender is one aspect in the promotion of equality race; class, disability, religion and nationality. Another one is equal opportunities in the curriculum that every school and college followed the same agenda to create a diverse learning environment within which individual characteristics, such as gender, age, nationality, disability and moral values are respected, but the next step is its implementation which is more necessary and appropriate to integrate equal opportunity policies and implement best practice. Pearl and Singh (1999) critically analysed the promotion of educational grants in the curriculum which has contributed a lot to gain insight in reaching the depth of the subject. We need very competent and specialist trained teachers to promote equal opportunities in school. Therefore special training should be arranged for them in their schools. Now the question arises, is there any special training required for teachers to aware of their responsibilities? And how far our institutions contribute for the promotion of race equality? Arora (2005) emphasised that to prepare teachers to challenge the existing practices requires a fundamental change of ethos in our educational institutions. Since teachers are ideally placed to play a leading role; as educators and as agents of change, acting to combat racism within school and outside world. It is even more important with greater involvement of parents under the new education act that teachers are clear about their understanding about the issues of team work and the support they can get from colleagues, head teacher and LEAs. Any member of the staff who fails to comply with the school policy for race equality should be dealt with under the school's agreed disciplinary procedure.

## CONCLUSION

School is a social organization where the class, ethnic, religious and gender differences are usually observed.

What and how are such issues settled by the school organization? It depends upon the school equal opportunity policy. It can be seen that the promotion of equal opportunities lies at the heart of class teacher because s/he because class teacher could be man or woman. Concluding with the evidence gathered by Banks et al. (2001) focuses on class teachers and their responsibilities as class teachers.

- Can you think of a time when you have unintentionally discriminated either for or against a pupil? Think about your presentation to classes, the resources you used and the tasks you expect of pupils.
- Is there evidence of bullying or 'stagnating' in your lessons? Are you actively able to promote inclusion?
- Can you think about circumstances in your lessons when all pupils would have felt particularly empowered? Might there have been occasion when some may have felt disempowered? What factors might have contributed to this?
- Have you ever talked to your pupils about how they view equal opportunities in classroom? Depending on the age of those you teach, this can be an extremely effective way of gaining insight in to what is actually like being taught by you. Do they have an idea of what it means to be discriminated against? Tell them how important it is that they feel included and provided for. Your professional judgement will tell you if their views have been distorted.

In As far as the success of equal opportunities in schools in concerned; a good understanding, knowledge and commitment in part of all teachers and line manager who is responsible of implementing equal opportunity strategies. The head teacher can play a vital role in the promotion of equality too. These discrimination issues could be dealt with the help of school, parents and the wider community to work together (Interview, headteacher). A stance on equal opportunities is implicitly and explicitly linked with the strategic management of a school through the articulation of values. These values should be put into practice during admission, in lessons, in the classroom and in the playground. Equally, decisions made about the management of the curriculum, particularly attitude to inclusion and expectations of pupils, trend to mirror the importance placed on the development of equal opportunities (Coleman, 2009).

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