Achieving Equity Post COVID-19?

Context

The COVID-19 pandemic has taken millions of lives and caused global crisis for education systems that will impact on the lives of millions of children and young people across the world. The OECD's Trends Shaping Education Spotlight 21 (OECD 2020a) highlighted equity as a key issue by suggesting that support for children faced with a "concentration of disadvantage" should be at the heart of a revised adaptive and responsive system resilience. Families and other partners in the wider community should also be part of this system to build resilience capacity and in strategic decision making. Contingency planning should also be included depending on capacity and resources. Overall, the focus of a revised education system should be on:

- reinforcing safety and trust – carers/parents need accurate, reliable, consistent information, through timely and well-targeted communications;
- building resilience through collective reflection, enhanced collaboration and distributed leadership, both horizontal and lateral;
- ensuring students' wellbeing and enabling learning continuity.

Most recently, Education Scotland and Scottish Government's Equity Audit (2021) has brought the challenge of mitigating the effects of the pandemic for the most disadvantaged into sharp focus with a rapid review of evidence and a number of vignettes from 54 schools. The Equity Audit identified five key themes:

1. Health and wellbeing support is required for children and young peoples' mental and physical health and wellbeing.
2. Lack of digital infrastructure and connectivity has a detrimental impact on the learning experiences of children and young people, particularly those from the most disadvantaged backgrounds.
3. Support for parents, carers and families requires effective communication and collaboration between partners and families.
4. Teaching provision and quality of learning varies and there are emerging differences in the provision experienced by those from more affluent and disadvantaged backgrounds.
5. Support for teachers and the wider workforce through targeted professional learning is key to developing an effective response to the pandemic.

The International Council of Education Advisers latest report reflected: "*COVID-19 is waging a war on all of society. This is particularly true in the most disadvantaged communities of Scotland. The pandemic reinforces the issue of equity as the defining agenda of our time.*" (ICEA, 2020, p.26). This paper draws on an extract from Chapman and Bell (2020) to highlight and explore some of the key medium and longer-term considerations for educational decision makers who are attempting to create more

equitable education systems post pandemic. First, the paper highlights some medium and longer-term considerations. Second, the paper offers a typology to stimulate thinking about how we might begin to frame the new-normal and concludes by offering questions for reflection.

Medium – Longer Term Considerations: Capabilities and Capacity Building

Rethinking or reimagining education systems for educational equity requires a fresh evidence-informed approach to pedagogy, curriculum and assessment. It also implies a different way of organising or reorganising learning, which relies more heavily on collaborative working, leadership for change and collective enquiry or collaborative research, to develop `innovative solutions for identified needs`. (OECD, 2020a). This requires an active engagement in the redesign of learning, teaching and assessment, potentially with an increased emphasis on the use of digital platforms and tools, in and out of schools. However, caution is required to ensure that the rush to online learning and teaching 'fix' in the current climate, doesn't reinforce or exacerbate the existing digital divide, due to a lack of access and quality of availability for some students and the lack of investment in teachers' digital preparedness (OECD, 2020b) and thus reinforce educational inequities.

This in turn implies a rethinking of teachers' professionalism to enable them to perform a wide range of roles which focus on learning, both off and online, ensuring the safety and wellbeing of children and young people, support for carers/parents and involvement in strategic planning and decision making. One way to support teachers in their 'new' roles would be to encourage and promote knowledge sharing through professional networks, with appropriate leadership and sufficient resources. (OECD, 2020a). Put simply, building back better and more equitable education systems would seem to be reliant on the quality of the educational offer within this new context and the level of opportunity for engagement for children and young people.

Future Considerations

Policymakers and educational leaders have difficult decisions to make for the immediate future (short-term) and in the coming 12-24 months (medium term) and beyond. Immediate steps are required for reopening schools, but they also need to prepare for possible future school closures should further waves of COVID-19 occur. Furthermore, the situation of ongoing uncertainty combined with the emerging evidence-base requires continual review and reworking of plans that have robust monitoring and evaluation systems in place, and all within a climate of financial austerity. However, the new normal also presents significant opportunities to reimagine and reboot education systems in new and creative ways. This could involve rethinking roles and relationships across different parts of the system by:

- rethinking and repurposing the system's accountability and improvement priorities and functions;
- rethinking the educational offer in terms of how and where learning takes place;
- reorganise learning teaching and assessment to serve the needs of all students including the most vulnerable;
- enhancing blended professional networking as a way of building collective knowledge for teachers to reinforce collaboration between schools, families and the wider community.

To build back better requires a leap of faith. These extraordinary times have exposed us to many new contexts which have demanded us to innovate and find new ways of working and learning. If we are to build back better we must resist the temptation to revert to our previous ways of working (that were becoming, if not were already outmoded before the pandemic) and reset our education system by viewing some of the foundations that have been laid down during the pandemic as an opportunity to future-proof our education system so that all children and young people can achieve their full potential irrespective of where they come from.

In order to bring about the cultural change to promote such a reimagined education system a fundamental reconceptualization of the purposes of education and how we define high quality outcomes, high quality educational offer levels of opportunities are also required. Here we need to think about outcomes in a much broader sense that give more equal standing to social, emotional and health and wellbeing outcomes and considers educational outcomes in terms of the capacities to play a full and active role in society. These outcomes will also need to be part of a reimagined system of assessment and achievements. Second, for the nature of the educational offer, how it is delivered and how it is accessed by all children and young people will need to be fit for purpose in this new and dynamic educational context. Third, the level of opportunity must be considered in terms of its nature, range, breadth and quality.

Towards a typology for building back better

The typology presented in figure 1 below is offered as a heuristic to support the develop of the thinking that is required to make this step change. The typology is premised on the assumption that in order to build back better education systems will require to develop a relevant high quality educational offer combined with high levels of opportunity and engagement. When these conditions prevail, social and intellectual capital is mitigated and educational systems deliver high quality educational outcomes for all learners. Put simply, education systems that are both excellent and equitable. These systems tend to exhibit the characteristics summarised in the top left quadrant of the typology below.

When the quality of the offer is low, but opportunity and engagement is high these conditions social and intellectual capital dominate further advantaging advantaged learners who achieve despite the quality of the educational offer. This situation reinforces educational inequity and leads to patch improvements across the system. The characteristics summarised in the top right quadrant tend to be key features of the system. Similarly, when the quality of the educational offer is high, but opportunity and engagement is low social and intellectual capital also dominate and further advantage advantaged learners. Once again, the system delivers patch improvements that reinforce educational inequities.

Finally, where the quality of the educational offer is low and opportunity and engagement is low, the bottom right of the quadrant outcomes are poor, and all learners fail to achieve their full potential. These are educational systems in decline. This is often reinforced by higher socio-economic families that have invested in the public education system fleeing into the private sector. This in turn further accelerates the downward spiral and entrenches educational inequities and social divisions.

Figure 1: A typology for building back better

	Quality of offer	
High		**Low**

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A

EXCELLENCE AND EQUITY

ALL LEARNERS FLOURISH

- Equality of access
- Social and intellectual capital mitigated
- Collective agency
- Inclusive values
- Collaborative systemic learning
- Shared ownership and context specific solutions
- Community cohesion
- Comprehensive provision
- High quality outcomes for all

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B

MEDIOCRITY AND INEQUITY

ADVANTAGED LEARNERS PREVAIL

- Inequality of access
- Social and intellectual capital dominate
- Individual agency prevails
- Structures and hierarchies dominate
- Overconfidence in professional judgements
- Uninformed prescription
- Lack of community engagement
- Increased competition and middle-class flight
- Mixed outcomes
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C

MEDIOCRITY AND INEQUITY

ADVANTAGED LEARNERS FLOURISH

- Inequality of access
- Social and intellectual capital dominate
- Individual agency prevails
- Failure to implement offer
- Lack of community engagement
- Increased competition and middle-class flight
- Mixed outcomes

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D

DECLINE AND REINFORCED INEQUITY

NO LEARNERS FLOURISH

- Access becomes irrelevant
- Social and intellectual capital dominate
- Individual agency prevails
- Lack of clarity, focus and purpose
- Lack of community cohesion
- Increased competition and middle-class flight
- Poor outcomes

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Level of opportunities (High ... Low)

(Chapman and Bell, 2020)

In conclusion, the following four key questions are designed to be explored in conjunction with the typology. The intention is that these questions may be useful to policy makers, practitioners and others engaged in the process of building back better. The aims of the questions are to stimulate thinking and debate as to how we might take the challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic and turn them in to an opportunity to build back better:

1. What needs to be done to reframe roles, relationships and ways of working to support all learners to succeed?
2. How can we support the cultural change that is necessary to support this reframing of roles, responsibilities and ways of working?
3. What practices need to emerge in this new environment?
4. How best can we support the development of these new practices?

At a time when the social and economic consequences look depressing it is more important than ever that our purpose and focus is building back better more equitable education systems so that all learners can succeed irrespective of their background or where they come from.

References

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