

# The Long Struggle for Educational Equity in Britain: 1944–2023

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*In this essay, I take the long view in reviewing initiatives for educational equity in Britain, examining both official initiatives and grassroots struggles for equitable educational outcomes over the past eighty years. I frame education policies in the context of other social policies from the immediate post–World War II era, notably the provision of universal health care, welfare, and the changing legal frameworks relating to equalities and immigration over the period. I address the contributions of minoritized communities in the struggle for educational equity, the impact of twentieth-century women’s movements, and more recent student-led initiatives to secure the availability, accessibility, adaptability, and acceptability of education. I identify all these as “acts of citizenship,” whereby communities constitute themselves as citizens and struggle for human rights.*

**T**he realization of an educational system that meets the needs of all children and young people across Britain remains elusive, despite repeated attempts to reform schooling and a succession of community-led pressures across the decades to ensure equitable schooling and educational justice for all.<sup>1</sup> Explanations for why this is the case are complex and relate as much to wider societal developments as to the success of specific education policies or struggles for justice. To reflect on the fight for educational equity in Britain over the period since World War II, I position grassroots activism alongside broader social and political developments, the legal structure, and policy initiatives at local and national levels. I do so by drawing on the 4 As framework of the right to education developed by Katerina Tomaševski, UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education, which examines education’s availability, accessibility, adaptability, and acceptability.<sup>2</sup>

During World War II, popular pressure across the United Kingdom for more progressive social policies grew, leading to the return of a Labour government in the 1945 general election.<sup>3</sup> There was an effort to reform and extend education, making schooling accessible to a broader school population than in the past, including the development of a state-funded system of secondary schools designed to address the perceived needs of students from diverse social backgrounds. The

immediate challenge for educational equity in this era centered on the needs of working-class students, who had, before the war, generally remained in elementary school until they reached the age of fourteen and had limited access to schooling beyond this age.

As it progressed through parliament, the 1944 Education Act for England and Wales was presented as the greatest measure of reform since mass schooling was introduced in 1870. This characterization was a very effective piece of political propaganda because the 1944 Act maintained an elite system of schooling.<sup>4</sup> It continued to provide the statutory basis for education for nearly five decades, with some of its provisions lasting into the twenty-first century. The Act effectively allowed for the development of secondary education, enabling the creation of two new types of secondary schools (secondary modern and technical) for children over the age of eleven, alongside the existing grammar schools. Students took an examination at age eleven, determining the type of schooling they would attend, and for most, the access route to higher education was firmly closed at that age. Although the 1944 Act raised the age when students left school from fourteen to fifteen years (with further provision to rise to sixteen), only a minority of students had access to academic learning beyond the age of eleven, either by winning a grammar-school place or, if from a wealthy family, by attending an independent (fee-paying) school.

A dual system of education continued between church and state, whereby churches (Anglican and Catholic) maintained a role in the governance of schools they had historically run in cooperation with local authorities (school boards). The new legal framework introduced religious instruction and a daily act of worship in *all* schools, due to a compromise agreement that reduced ecclesiastical influence in the governance of schools founded by church authorities. This created long-term tensions between clerical interests and those of the teaching profession, secular parents, and, indeed, the right of students to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion.<sup>5</sup> In these respects, the 1944 Education Act proved to be a rather conservative measure when set alongside other social reforms of the era. It did little to democratize education and hindered the universal access to more inclusive schools that had become the dream of progressive educators.

The 1944 Act not only protected the conservative interests of the Christian churches but maintained tight control over access to academic education for working-class students through the grammar schools. Plans to democratize education, conceived in the prewar period and discussed by progressive policymakers and teachers' unions during the war, had included proposals to bring an end to the parallel-provision system that enables independent schools to operate alongside state schools, and to incorporate independent schools into a national framework of state schools available to all. Conservative education minister Rab Butler deftly steered the new education legislation through parliament, managing to shelve all such radical proposals.

The 1944 Act ensured the availability of secondary education to all students up to fifteen years of age, but despite its claims, did little to ensure equitable access to secondary schooling or higher education. Policymakers falsely asserted the adaptability of the new system with its technical and secondary modern schools. In truth, the adaptations were based on the problematic characterization of young children according to intelligence tests that drew on discredited eugenics-based theories of intelligence.<sup>6</sup> The 1944 Act effectively confirmed an established pattern of access to higher education based on social class and gender biases that privileged middle-class boys. At a young age, most working-class students were set on a path that prepared them for early employment.

By the 1960s, a small number of working-class students, predominantly boys, were entering what remained an elitist university sector alongside their more privileged peers. Throughout the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, sociocultural and economic constraints meant that even when working-class girls did access a grammar school education, they were more likely than boys to enter the workplace after completing their secondary education, and less likely to continue on to university.<sup>7</sup> When girls of all social classes elected to follow a path into higher education, they frequently took up places at teacher training colleges since teaching was considered a career compatible with motherhood.<sup>8</sup> In the 1950s and 1960s, these institutions did not award degree-level qualifications. The early-twentieth-century women's movements focused on the struggle for universal suffrage, and women in the United Kingdom finally secured an equal right, with men, to vote from the age of twenty-one under the 1928 Representation of the People (Equal Franchise) Act. While expanding opportunities for women's political participation may have inspired girls to extend their educational and career horizons, full recognition of women's rights in education remained elusive. As education scholar Rosemary Deem notes, "Only in the 1960s and 1970s with the growth of a significantly sized Women's Liberation Movement in Britain, and the progress of legislation relating to the equal treatment of males and females in public life, have sexual divisions in education come to be perceived as a problem of considerable significance."<sup>9</sup> The suffrage movement, international commitments to human rights, and popular pressures for more progressive social policies in the immediate aftermath of World War II increased awareness of the possibilities for both girls and working-class students.

But it was not until the implementation of domestic legislation in the 1970s relating to equal opportunities in public life, such as the Equal Pay Act of 1970 and the Sex Discrimination Act of 1975, that further steps toward educational equity were made. Women's struggles for equality in the 1960s and parallel struggles for racial justice needed the backing of legislation to ensure their longer-term success. The accessibility of an academic secondary education remained elusive for the majority: girls and working-class students, especially those from racialized communities, were excluded by selection processes championed as fair but were

by their very nature exclusionary. Yet the small number of working-class students who did secure access to an elite grammar school education allowed the illusion of a meritocracy to be maintained throughout the 1950s and 1960s.

**I** turn now to other social and economic initiatives that interacted with and impacted efforts to realize educational equity. The mid-twentieth-century reform of education in England and Wales (and parallel initiatives in Scotland and Northern Ireland) took place alongside the implementation of other significant social policies. These other social policies, introduced in the immediate postwar era, were probably more significant in enabling educational equity and accessibility in the longer term. The Beveridge Report, published in 1944, set out the architecture for a welfare state based on the concept of universalism. All citizens would contribute to social insurance that would cover them for a range of social risks. The three pillars of the welfare state were to be universal insurance, universal health care, and a public commitment to full employment.<sup>10</sup>

With public opinion favorable to the Beveridge Report and a new universal health care system that was free at the point of access, both the Labour and Conservative Parties promised comprehensive medical care and social insurance as a key feature of their 1945 election campaigns. The Labour government that came to power that year continued the work of the wartime Conservative-led coalition to set up the National Health Service (NHS).<sup>11</sup> A progressive welfare state with universal access to social and employment support and NHS health care was critical in ensuring the accessibility of education for children born in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s. These generations of children were largely spared the deprivations and acute hardship of the prewar years, and consequent improvements in both maternal and child health care, including childhood vaccination programs, helped lower child mortality rates dramatically and enhanced children's school attendance and opportunities to learn.<sup>12</sup> The provision of universal health care through the NHS underpinned and enabled the effective implementation of initiatives for educational equity in the latter part of the century.

The development of universal health care and moves to expand secondary education coincided with the arrival of new migrants. India became an independent state in 1947, and while Britain still had a significant empire when Queen Elizabeth II's reign began five years later, a number of these territories were engaged in independence struggles. Following World War II, the United Kingdom needed immigrants from its colonies and former colonies to address a labor shortage across various sectors. The arrival of migrants of color in Britain and the need to educate their children in the schools of the metropolis exposed huge disparities and led to further struggles for educational equity.

The 1948 British Nationality Act clarified the status of residents of Britain's overseas territories, introducing the status of "citizen of the U.K. and col-

onies" (CUKC), and retaining the term "British subject" for all citizens of Commonwealth countries: namely, those from the United Kingdom, from longer-established independent former colonies (such as Australia and South Africa), and from newly independent former colonies and existent colonies. British subjects were not subject to immigration controls.

The 1948 arrival in London of the *S.S. Empire Windrush* marked the symbolic beginning of immigration from the Caribbean region in the postwar era; among the migrants were a number who had served in the British armed forces during the war.<sup>13</sup> In 1949, the Ministries of Health and Labour, with the Colonial Office, the General Nursing Council, and the Royal College of Nursing, began a massive recruitment drive throughout the Caribbean region to hire staff for the newly established NHS, a move that was key to its success but that had a negative impact on the places the new recruits were drawn from. The 1950s and 1960s featured the migration of adults (colonial-born British subjects and Irish citizens), followed by that of child migrants from these countries and from South Asia.

The 1944 Education Act not only managed and controlled working-class access to academic learning but was also soon applied to immigrant students from existent and former colonies. Prevailing stereotypes, discriminatory attitudes, and the predominant theories of intelligence on which selection to academic streaming were based, and on which the British Empire had operated (allowing for the exploitation of both the natural resources and labor in these colonial territories to support Britain's industrialization), meant that access to a grammar school education was frequently denied both to immigrant students and the children of immigrants.

Prevailing attitudes meant that both child migrants and U.K.-born children of migrants were frequently channeled into nonacademic streams during the 1950s and 1960s. The division of students into three categories, envisaged by the 1944 Education Act and based on a discredited theory of eugenics encompassing racial hierarchies, was easily extended to the newcomers. Just as migrant adults were often recruited to take on specific manual work but excluded from professional positions, so children were allocated to schools according to both race and class. The expectation was that they were better suited to manual and lower-paid employment. Those arriving with qualifications from British overseas territories, who had followed a U.K.-styled education, were often obliged to take on work for which they were overqualified: they were effectively redesignated as working class. For those who were highly skilled, their qualifications (generally obtained under a British-style education system) were frequently either unrecognized or judged in need of an upgrade before they could practice their profession in the United Kingdom.<sup>14</sup>

Children of immigrants were not expected to be upwardly mobile but to accept education and training for lateral positions. Just as a marriage bar preventing

the employment of married women in the teaching profession was not fully lifted until 1944, so British-born citizens with a foreign-born parent were barred from a career in the U.K. civil service other than in the lowest grades until the 1980s, ostensibly because of concerns about security and allegiance. In the late 1970s, when I completed university, although I had had various civil service vacation jobs, I found a civil service career was not open to me: I was ruled out on the grounds that one of my parents was foreign-born.<sup>15</sup>

In designating three different types of students, the 1944 Education Act served to maintain existing class hierarchies that could accommodate migrants into the mix without challenging the racist stereotyping perpetuated during colonialization. Education legislation conformed to a theory of eugenics based on a hierarchy of both race and class. It became commonsense to send children to schools that would match their specific fixed talents and abilities. It was straightforward to apply these practices first to working-class children and then extend them to migrant children. By framing education in this way, it was possible for schools to perpetuate inequalities and accept social and racial hierarchies as inevitable. Although eugenics was increasingly recognized as racist from the 1930s, after eugenics-based policies were adopted by the Nazis to perpetuate genocide, practices that labeled children at a young age and allocated them to specific schools continued, impacting directly on their future employment and life chances.<sup>16</sup> It seems that policymakers were able to disconnect their education framework from its eugenics roots and present it as neutral and natural.

The children of new migrants from the Caribbean, Pakistan, and India faced inequitable treatment at school, with school authorities regularly identifying an educational deficit. Children of Caribbean heritage found themselves grossly overrepresented in special streams and special schools, known as schools for the “educationally subnormal.” Policy documents of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s identified both South Asian– and Caribbean-heritage children as having a language deficit that hindered their learning. Children from these communities who later went on to be teachers themselves confirmed that teachers were quick to judge them based on their language, religion, or even hairstyle, uncritically absorbing and reproducing stereotypes from the popular culture of the era.<sup>17</sup>

Politicians and policymakers saw it as a question of numbers. The very existence of children of color was seen as a hindrance to White children’s learning. They claimed that where such students of color made up more than one-third of the total, poor results were inevitable.<sup>18</sup> Effectively, schools and education authorities were denying their professional responsibilities toward students of Caribbean and South Asian heritage.

The 1960s was an age of mass communications. By 1960, approximately 75 percent of U.K. households owned a TV.<sup>19</sup> They had access to TV news that updated them both on independence struggles and on the struggle for civil rights in the

United States. In 1960, the United Nations General Assembly passed the *Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples*, which asserted that “the subjection of peoples to alien subjugation, domination and exploitation constitutes a denial of fundamental human rights,” and “all peoples have the right to self-determination; by virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development.”<sup>20</sup>

It was community activists who took the initiative and sought to intervene on behalf of children and work for educational equity in the United Kingdom, focusing first on access to mainstream education. Just as the U.S. civil rights struggles of the 1950s were inspired by earlier anticolonial struggles, the struggle for educational equity by Black parents in Britain in the late 1960s and into the 1970s drew on the U.S. struggles for civil rights by African American citizens and their allies. A turning point was the 1971 publication of the book *How the West Indian Child Is Made Educationally Sub-Normal in the British School System: The Scandal of the Black Child in Schools in Britain*.<sup>21</sup> Its author, Grenadian scholar and teacher Bernard Coard, demonstrated how Caribbean-heritage children were being systematically excluded from mainstream schooling, labeled “sub-normal,” and sent to special schools.<sup>22</sup>

Coard kickstarted a movement within Black communities wherein parents learned to be vigilant. They could not rely on schools to guarantee the best educational outcomes for their children. A parallel system of supplementary schools operating on Saturdays or in the evening staffed by Black volunteers committed to the education of Black children was established in cities such as London and Birmingham.<sup>23</sup> Parents were offered support in monitoring their children’s progress and to ensure their needs were met. Other supplementary schools and classes were established and run by South Asian organizations, generally focusing on the teaching of heritage languages, with supplementary schooling remaining popular among many parents from these communities until the 1990s, and replicated among other migrant groups.<sup>24</sup> By the late 1970s, parents and community activists were not just working for the accessibility of education but also for its adaptability; they recognized that children’s right to education meant that teaching and curricula needed to be culturally responsive.<sup>25</sup>

The efforts of the voluntary teachers and organizers of these and other schools that were set up to support the learning and home cultures of students of South Asian backgrounds may be understood as “acts of citizenship,” whereby communities of color constituting themselves as citizens engaged in struggles for the human rights of their children.<sup>26</sup> Specifically, members of the community were acting to ensure equitable access to education and eventual access to higher education, recognition of schooling in keeping with parental wishes, and access to the arts and cultural life through education.<sup>27</sup>

Coard’s work placed equitable treatment at the heart of education. Local education authorities began to recognize their responsibility toward education for

all, regardless of ethnicity and migration status, and took their tentative first steps toward the development of multicultural education. Multicultural education focused initially on building culturally appropriate learning materials. These were the first official efforts to ensure the adaptability of education.

Following the election of a Labour government in 1964, children were no longer required to take an examination at the age of eleven to determine which sort of school they should be sent to, although grammar schools and other processes of selection continued in many local authorities. Local education authorities were required to submit plans for the reorganization of secondary schools along comprehensive lines: that is, without separating children on the grounds of ability or attainment. Some Conservative-controlled local authorities were slow to implement these plans, and some grammar schools continued operating alongside more inclusive comprehensive schools.<sup>28</sup> Some remain to this day, disadvantaging most students who do not have access to the grammar schools. Organizations such as the Campaign for State Education (CASE), founded in 1960, engage in activities such as political lobbying, research, and involvement at a local level to ensure that education is democratically accountable.<sup>29</sup> These activities, continuing over decades and largely dependent on voluntary activity, can again be seen as acts of citizenship, often taking place at a grassroots level.

The 1970s saw the introduction of new legal provisions that bolstered efforts to achieve educational equity. The 1970 Equal Pay Act was the first piece of legislation to enshrine the right to pay equality between women and men, under which a woman could claim equal pay to a man for work that was the same or broadly similar, rated as equivalent under a job evaluation scheme, or of equal value, that is, requiring the same level of effort, skill, knowledge, or responsibility. Though far from a watertight guarantee of justice in a gender-segregated labor market, it marked a symbolic step forward. Equal pay set a positive climate for girls and women to pursue education and training, and so arguably marked a step toward educational equity.

Five years later, the 1975 Sex Discrimination Act was passed. According to legal scholar Anne Morris: “The Sex Discrimination Act 1975 was immensely significant for a whole generation of women who needed no longer to accept that sexism was just the way of the world. They could point to the Sex Discrimination Act and challenge the discrimination they faced.”<sup>30</sup> With a legal remedy when they encountered sexism in school, girls and young women in education were empowered by this progress toward securing their rights. The Sex Discrimination Act was quickly followed by the 1976 Race Relations Act, which built on earlier race equality legislation (1965 and 1968), and extended the law to cover education, as well as expanding the definition of discriminatory actions to include indirect discrimination.<sup>31</sup> Individuals gained the right to take discrimination complaints directly



to civil courts or industrial tribunals, and the new Commission for Racial Equality was given responsibility to enforce legislation and conduct research to inform government policy, including in the field of education. Legislation to prevent disability discrimination was slow to follow. It was not until 1995 that the Disability Discrimination Act came into being, following UNESCO's 1994 Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education.<sup>32</sup> It proclaimed that

those with special educational needs must have access to regular schools which should accommodate them within a child-centered pedagogy capable of meeting these needs, [and] regular schools with this inclusive orientation are the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all....[Inclusive schools] improve the efficiency and ultimately the cost-effectiveness of the entire education system.<sup>33</sup>

The 2010 Equalities Act consolidated earlier equalities legislation and enshrined its provisions, recognizing that for individuals and communities working for justice, these threads of social justice addressing various characteristics and aspects of identity (including gender, race, disability, and sexuality) are closely intertwined and interconnected. These legal developments were made possible by the hard work of activists who campaigned for justice in society and education over many decades. Their struggle, which continues today, may be understood as a series of "acts of citizenship" cumulating in legal and societal change.

Education remained the responsibility of local government until the end of the 1980s, and various progressive initiatives, notably in multicultural education, were fostered in local government during long periods of Conservative rule in central government.<sup>34</sup> From the late 1970s, local authorities responsible for education at the municipal or county level began to establish training and support for teachers in multicultural education. While some such initiatives were ad hoc and short-lived, they signaled momentum. The emphasis was frequently on teaching English as a second or additional language but increasing attention was given to books and teaching aids. These materials addressed questions of gender and sexuality as well as social, cultural, and religious diversity.

By the 1980s, more progressive local education authorities (namely, school boards) were introducing initiatives to reform curricula and provide opportunities for all, focusing first and foremost on students of color. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the Inner London Education Authority (ILEA) played a leading role in this work.<sup>35</sup> From 1979, the Conservative government, under Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, grew increasingly hostile toward multicultural education and particularly toward the ILEA, which it saw as profligate.<sup>36</sup>

The publication of two parliamentary reports in the 1980s also had a significant effect in shifting policy in education toward greater equity. In the absence of any legislation to this effect, both were welcomed by education activists and

stakeholders. First, *West Indian Children in Our Schools*, published in 1981, was a direct response to a 1977 Parliamentary Select Committee on Race Relations and Immigration report on West Indian student attainment.<sup>37</sup> It noted “widespread concern about the poor performance of West Indian children in schools” but stopped short of mentioning racism. It was followed in 1985 by *Education for All*, informally named the Swann Report after Lord Michael Swann, which extended the brief of the initial committee of inquiry to address the education of all children from ethnic minorities.<sup>38</sup> It concluded that the main problems were low teacher expectations and racial prejudice among White teachers and society writ large. While “racial prejudice” was acknowledged, there was again no explicit discussion of racism as a structural barrier to educational success. Although sections of the national press were hostile to multicultural education and had attacked the work of the Development Programme on Racial Equality in the London Borough of Brent as that of “race spies in the classroom,” the Swann Report effectively confirmed the need for such work.<sup>39</sup>

While the majority of support staff working on multicultural education in various municipalities continued to focus on language education, there were smaller units of advisory teachers (for example, in the City of Birmingham) directly developing strategies to identify and address institutional racism. They worked to enable the development of culturally appropriate learning materials (“multicultural development unit”) and meet the needs of specific groups that schools were failing to support (such as with the Afro-Caribbean teaching unit). These initiatives existed alongside larger previously established teams of specialist educators who worked to support teachers in addressing the needs of developing bilingual students. The Swann Report received a mixed response from teachers and teachers’ unions. Among those already engaged in race equality work, it was generally seen as helpful and its message somewhat measured; others clearly felt threatened by it.

In 1986, a Manchester schoolboy, thirteen-year-old Ahmed Iqbal Ullah, died after being stabbed by a fellow student in the playground of Burnage High School. The findings of the inquiry into Ahmed’s death were published with the title *Murder in the Playground: Report of the Macdonald Inquiry into Racism and Racial Violence in Manchester Schools*.<sup>40</sup> The report confirmed a culture of violence and racial tensions in which the attack occurred, but noted that the way the school authorities responded to the murder inflamed these tensions, and so the repercussions were felt for a long time. The Burnage Report, as it was known, noted that in the aftermath of riots in Manchester’s Moss Side in 1981, a report to the city’s education committee recommended that all schools and colleges produce policies on racism. Although it provided some examples, it did not define racism or provide guidelines on how this should be done, or how antiracist strategies should be implemented and monitored. Not all Manchester teachers shared the commitment of the city’s leaders. Others, such as at Burnage High School, shared the commit-

ment but went about things in a way that proved to be counterproductive. The Burnage Report outlined how efforts to introduce antiracist strategies need to engage both teachers and students in the process, and be cognizant of past efforts to address school violence.<sup>41</sup> The clumsy way the school had labeled its students and passed judgment on them had accentuated a divide between those deemed responsible for racism and those judged its victims. The findings of the Burnage Report were characterized by right-wing sections of the press as proof that schools' antiracist policies had failed, which resulted in further confusion between the ideals of antiracism and a widespread blame culture.<sup>42</sup>

Throughout the 1980s, there were tensions in schools across England relating to the way schools addressed racist behavior among students and handled (or ignored) the need for change in the face of unequal educational outcomes between students from different ethnic groups.<sup>43</sup> In this decade, a number of local authorities shifted in their level of commitment to addressing issues of educational equity. By this stage, Birmingham in the English Midlands was the largest authority, the ILEA having been split into smaller units. In Birmingham, I observed firsthand the city's director of education, Tim Brighouse, working closely with parents, community groups, and the University of Birmingham (where I was based) to close the attainment gap between the highest- and lowest-attaining students. The local authority provided schools with statistical data and expert advice so that resources could be directed toward addressing underachievement of specific groups. From 1994 to 1996, the city worked in cooperation with a local community organization, ACAFESS, to fund ten doctoral students' educations, which enabled them to engage in part-time research, examining aspects of African Caribbean education.<sup>44</sup> The researchers, of African Caribbean heritage themselves, focused on topics varying from school-governing bodies to supplementary schooling to student attainment. The doctoral students met once a month on a Saturday morning to share and discuss their findings. As the lead supervisor of these researchers, all of whom were mature students and experienced professionals, I observed how inspired they were to see the director of education attend their meetings to learn from them.

There was minimal support in the 1990s from the Conservative Westminster government to engage with local authorities, teachers' unions, or other stakeholders in advancing educational equity. Much depended on the commitment of local directors of education working in cooperation with their education committees (generally in Labour-controlled cities) who were sympathetic to these goals.

**S**ignificantly, the introduction of a national curriculum, with a series of subject-based programs of study, effectively ended opportunities for teacher-led curricula development, which had enabled so many of the locally based initiatives for educational equity. In 1987, the Department of Education and Science (responsible at that time for education in England and Wales) issued a consultation

document for this national curriculum that set out its rationale: a student entitlement to a “broad and balanced curriculum,” setting standards for pupil attainment that it saw as supporting school “accountability,” improving continuity and coherence across the curriculum, and aiding public understanding of the work of schools.<sup>45</sup> The 1988 Education Reform Act established the framework for the national curriculum: schooling was divided into four key stages, with a testing regime introduced at the end of the second stage, which was for eleven-year-olds at primary school, and at the end of the third stage, which was for fourteen-year-olds at secondary school. Together with national GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education) examinations at age sixteen, this ensured that a large amount of teaching was directed toward students who achieved well in the tests, and schools were judged by their test scores. Individual student needs took second place to a school’s reputation, measured by test scores.<sup>46</sup>

In 1993, responsibility for school inspections was transferred from Her Majesty’s inspectors and local authority teams to independent inspection teams coordinated by a new body, the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted). During its first decade, Ofsted became a feared body because an inspection team’s published judgment of a school (ratings that included *outstanding*, *good*, *requires improvement*, and *inadequate*) determined the future of the school, and potentially that of its principal.<sup>47</sup> School effectiveness, quality of education, student behavior, and leadership and management were all graded, generally by a weeklong inspection for which vast amounts of paperwork had to be generated by the teaching and leadership teams. School-based work to ensure educational equity generally took second place to the demands of the national curriculum and Ofsted inspections.

Although the 1988 Education Reform Act was introduced under a Conservative government, the election of a Labour government in 1997 saw little real change regarding either the new testing regime or the Ofsted inspection framework. But Labour’s 1999 response to an earlier issue related to policing and racial justice would eventually impact the school inspection framework. In 1993, Stephen Lawrence, an eighteen-year-old Black man, was stabbed to death at a bus stop in southeast London by a group of White youths in an unprovoked, racist attack. Although one of Stephen’s friends witnessed the attack and the police eventually arrested five suspects, only two were charged. It was not until nearly twenty years later that two of those responsible for Stephen’s murder were convicted. The case was kept in the public eye by Stephen’s parents’ struggle for justice. His mother Doreen Lawrence’s long-standing commitment led to the Home Office initiating the 1999 Macpherson Inquiry into the police investigation of Stephen’s murder. Its report was highly critical and diagnosed the Metropolitan Police Service (“the Met”) as “institutionally racist.”<sup>48</sup> In 2012, a second independent review of the police investigation, the Ellison Review, was also highly critical of how the case was handled.<sup>49</sup>

The government's response to concerns about institutional racism was an action plan that sought to address education as well as policing.<sup>50</sup> It charged Ofsted with the responsibility to inspect schools for racial equality. Under the leadership of Herman Ouseley, the Commission for Racial Equality solicited research into Ofsted's role in enabling race equality in schools. I made a successful bid for this research, and my colleagues and I examined documentary evidence and interviewed members of the Ofsted leadership. We found that the then chief inspector of schools interpreted the Home Office guidance as requiring no changes or amendments to the inspection regime. No training was provided for school inspectors to match the training and awareness initiatives introduced in the Met and other police forces across the country.<sup>51</sup> Ofsted was obligated to give the research team access, but senior team members barely took our interview seriously, telling me that at Ofsted: "Race equality is not a priority. Our priority is under-achieving white boys." Shockingly, for an administrative body that required schools to produce complex paper trails, Chief Inspector Chris Woodhead, confirming they had done nothing in response to the Home Secretary's action plan, wrote: "We do not rely on paper communication in OFSTED."<sup>52</sup> Woodhead was required to defend his position in Parliament in October 2000. A few days later, he resigned. It is not apparent that Ofsted made any real changes to enhance race equality under its next leader, Woodhead's former deputy.

**A**n important group of stakeholders in the struggle for educational equity is the students themselves. In 1972, they organized to form the National Union of School Students, but the union was short-lived. Nevertheless, social policies relating to children and childhood have shifted hugely since the 1940s. The 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child – which applies to all children and youth under eighteen years of age – has been instrumental in shaping public policies relating to children and schooling across the globe.<sup>53</sup> Although education has arguably been more resistant to change than health care, it is increasingly recognized in Europe and across the globe that children have the right to be consulted in all decisions affecting them, in education as in other policy areas, in accordance with the Convention's Article 12. Interestingly, this has probably been most significant across the United Kingdom in relation to children with disabilities and those with special educational needs.

Although political theorists have tended to neglect or ignore children and young people and their partial citizenship remains underexplored, this has not prevented them from engaging in struggles for equity, most notably in the Black Lives Matter movement and in highlighting intergenerational justice.<sup>54</sup> Youth demands for intergenerational justice have been most keenly expressed in relation to environmental issues and especially climate change. The Fridays for Future Movement, initiated by the school strike of Swedish teenager Greta Thunberg

outside the Swedish parliament in 2018, has grown into a global youth movement. Among their concerns has been the relevance of an education that fails to address climate change and the acceptability of schooling. Although some U.K. schools were initially worried about the reputational damage that striking students might cause, many teachers welcomed and supported students in their protests and recognized that Fridays for Future peaceful protests constituted an act of citizenship, as well as an opportunity to apply classroom learning for citizenship and democracy and understand and experience global interdependence in a real and effective way.

Significant economic developments since the turn of the twenty-first century have had an immediate impact on educational equity in the United Kingdom. However, the financial prospects for school leavers are bleak. Following Brexit and the COVID-19 pandemic, as *The New Statesman* observed: “Britain is the only G7 economy that has yet to return to its pre-pandemic size. Its workers have endured 15 years of stagnant or falling real wages while its businesses have largely refrained from investing during eight years of political chaos. Students today face an average debt at graduation of more than GBP 45,000 (nearly USD 56,000).”<sup>55</sup> If this sum seems modest by U.S. standards, it should be remembered that until 2016, students from low-income homes were entitled to maintenance grants, and that before 1998, students from the United Kingdom and European Union could attend U.K. universities tuition-free. The university sector expanded from the 1970s to include significant numbers of working-class students. But in the twenty-first century, anyone without significant financial parental support will find themselves leaving university saddled with debt. Educational inequalities widened in the results for the 2023 A-level examinations. A student’s grades on A-level exams determine whether or not they can follow the course or attend the university of their choice, with courses such as medicine requiring top grades. An A or A\* grade was recorded in 47.4 percent of private school entries, more than double the rate of state schools (22 percent), and the gap has been increasing since 2019.<sup>56</sup> There are also significant and increasing regional inequalities across England. COVID-19 not only exposed health inequalities and an inadequate underfunded NHS; it also highlighted social and educational inequities, with many children required to switch to online learning in cramped housing, reliant initially on a shared smartphone.

**T**he twenty-first century has seen an ongoing struggle between progressive and conservative groups over issues such as gender equity and attempts to decolonize the school curriculum at both primary and secondary levels. Today, the overall examination achievements of girls generally exceed those of their male peers, but there remain ethnic disparities in educational outcomes.<sup>57</sup> Child poverty continues to be a serious impediment to educational success, a factor that

was highlighted and exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Post-lockdowns, many children have disappeared from official view with many failing to return to school. In the post-Brexit era, with wider expressions of exclusive forms of nationalism, there is nevertheless hope for change, with school-aged activists espousing more cosmopolitan perspectives. Student-led school strikes in response to the climate emergency, and other movements in which youth play a leading role, such as the global spread of the Black Lives Matter and Me Too movements, suggest that children in the United Kingdom, across Europe, and worldwide are questioning the relevance of much of the education they are offered; highlighting intergenerational injustice; and contributing to the ongoing struggle for educational equity.

In presenting the long view, it is inevitable that some official initiatives have been covered in an abbreviated way. When addressing the struggles of diverse communities, it is impossible to cover all in depth. Nevertheless, this breadth of coverage allows insight into patterns of struggle across diverse groups and fresh perspectives on the ways acts of citizenship contribute to change. The long view highlights and emphasizes the need for communities to maintain grassroots struggles on a continuous basis. Justice in education is closely connected to justice in health care and depends on addressing the widening gap between the elite and the wider population. Educators, students, and activists working for greater justice in and through education must recommit their efforts to further educational equity, and not depend solely on the achievements and acts of citizenship of past generations.

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#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Audrey Osler** is Professor Emerita of Citizenship and Human Rights Education at the University of Leeds. She is widely known for her research on children's rights and racial justice, and has worked as an educator in many countries, predominantly in Europe, East Asia, and North America. She has been an advisor to the Council of Europe, UNESCO, and various national governments. Her books include *Where Are You From? No, Where Are You Really From?* (2023), *Human Rights and Schooling: An Ethical Framework for Teaching about Social Justice* (2016), and the edited collection *Nordic Perspectives on Human Rights Education: Research and Practice for Social Justice* (with Beate Goldschmidt-Gjerløw, 2024).

ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> This essay focuses primarily on Britain (England, Scotland, and Wales), but not Northern Ireland, when discussing social policies and community-led struggles for equity. For education policy, my twentieth-century focus is England and Wales. Scotland has had a separate educational legal framework and governance structure throughout the period under consideration. From 1999, governance of education in Wales was devolved to the Welsh Assembly, and so for twenty-first-century education policy, my focus is England alone. Access to education in Britain's existent colonies over the period is outside the scope of this essay, but it is worth noting that educational provision in these territories was rarely, if ever, a priority of the British state. The churches (Anglican and Catholic) took responsibility for the education of an elite group of colonial subjects, who followed a British-style curriculum and took the same school-leaving examinations in anticipation of higher education.
- <sup>2</sup> Katarina Tomaševski, *Human Rights Obligations: Making Education Available, Accessible, Acceptable and Adaptable* (Raoul Wallenberg Institute, 2001), <https://dspace.ceid.org.tr/xmlui/bitstream/handle/1/84/ekutuphane4.1.3.2.pdf?sequence=1>.
- <sup>3</sup> Although my primary focus is Britain, I refer to the United Kingdom to include Northern Ireland, when appropriate, as in the development of the National Health Service, and when discussing matters such as immigration law, which is necessarily consistent across the four constituent nations of the United Kingdom.
- <sup>4</sup> Brian Simon, "The 1944 Education Act: A Conservative Measure?" *History of Education* 15 (1) (1986): 31–43, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0046760860150104>.
- <sup>5</sup> This moral right was asserted under the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 18. United Nations, "Universal Declaration of Human Rights," adopted by the U.N. General Assembly on December 10, 1948, <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights#:~:text=Drafted%20by%20representatives%20with%20different,all%20peoples%20and%20all%20nations>. For more on the history of the influence of church and state in schools, see S. J. D. Green, "The 1944 Education Act: A Church-State Perspective," *Parliamentary History* 19 (1) (2000): 148–164, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1750-0206.2000.tb00450.x>.
- <sup>6</sup> Clyde Chitty, *Eugenics, Race, and Intelligence in Education* (Bloomsbury, 2007).
- <sup>7</sup> Rosemary Deem, *Women and Schooling* (Routledge, 1978).
- <sup>8</sup> Kathleen Casey, "Teacher as Mother: Curriculum Theorizing in the Life Histories of Contemporary Women Teachers," *Cambridge Journal of Education* 20 (3): 301–320, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0305764900200310>.
- <sup>9</sup> Deem, *Women and Schooling*, 1.
- <sup>10</sup> David Benassi, "Father of the Welfare State? Beveridge and the Emergence of the Welfare State," *Sociologica* 4 (3) (2010): 1–20.
- <sup>11</sup> Chris Day, "The Beveridge Report and the Foundations of the Welfare State," National Archives Blog, December 7, 2017, <https://blog.nationalarchives.gov.uk/beveridge-report-foundations-welfare-state>.
- <sup>12</sup> The British government made childhood vaccination against smallpox compulsory in 1853. From 1940, a vaccination program against diphtheria saw rates decline rapidly from 46,281 cases (2,480 deaths) in 1940 to 37 cases (6 deaths) in 1957. Mehzebin Adam, "The



- History of Vaccines,” British Red Cross, last modified June, 18, 2021, <https://www.redcross.org.uk/stories/our-movement/our-history/vaccination-a-history-of-saving-lives>.
- <sup>13</sup> Shelene Gomez and Arthur Torrington, “The Windrush Generation and British Citizenship Policy,” in *Immigrant Lives: Intersectionality, Transnationality, and Global Perspectives*, ed. Edward Shizha and Edward Makwarimba (University Press, 2023).
- <sup>14</sup> Audrey Osler, *The Education and Careers of Black Teachers: Changing Identities, Changing Lives* (Open University Press, 1997).
- <sup>15</sup> I have not been able to discover from the public record whether this rule extended to individuals who had a parent born in former British territories such as Canada or Australia colonized by White settlers, or whether they were exempt.
- <sup>16</sup> Chitty, *Eugenics, Race, and Intelligence in Education*.
- <sup>17</sup> Osler, *The Education and Careers of Black Teachers*; and Sally Tomlinson, *Race and Education: Policy and Politics in Britain* (Open University Press, 2008).
- <sup>18</sup> Osler, *The Education and Careers of Black Teachers*.
- <sup>19</sup> Charlotte Goodhart, “Television through the Ages,” Museum of the Home, November 12, 2020, <https://www.museumofthehome.org.uk/explore/stories-of-home/television-through-the-ages/#:~:text=By%20the%201960s%2C%2075%25%20of,contemporary%20culture%20and%20world%20events>.
- <sup>20</sup> United Nations General Assembly, *Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples*, Article 1 and Article 2 (United Nations, December 14, 1960).
- <sup>21</sup> West Indian was a commonly used term in the 1960s and 1970s, now outmoded.
- <sup>22</sup> Bernard Coard, *How the West Indian Child Is Made Educationally Sub-Normal in the British School System* (New Beacon Books, 1971).
- <sup>23</sup> Cornel Dacosta, *Ideology and Practice within the Black Supplementary School Movement* (PhD diss., University of Surrey, 1987).
- <sup>24</sup> Angeliki Voskou, “Students’ Identity Development in Greek Supplementary Schools in England from 1950s to 2010s,” *International Journal of the History of Education* 59 (1) (2023): 171–190. While the number of students attending supplementary schools has declined, they remain a salient feature for many still attending them today. See YPF Trust, “Quality in Supplementary Education,” <https://www.supplementaryeducation.org.uk> (accessed September 27, 2024).
- <sup>25</sup> Geneva Gay, “The What, Why, and How of Culturally Responsive Teaching: International Mandates, Challenges, and Opportunities,” *Multicultural Education Review* 7 (3) (2015): 123–139, <https://doi.org/10.1080/2005615X.2015.1072079>.
- <sup>26</sup> Egin F. Isin, “Theorising Acts of Citizenship,” in *Acts of Citizenship*, ed. Egin F. Isin and Greg M. Neilsen (Zed Books, 2008), 15–43.
- <sup>27</sup> United Nations, Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 2 and Article 26, <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>.
- <sup>28</sup> Grammar schools that had had selective admissions policies since 1997 and 1998 were allowed to retain them. The general prohibition against academic selection has been further relaxed by successive Conservative governments since 2016. As of 2022, just 35 local authorities had any grammar schools and 60 percent were situated in just 11 local authorities. Across England, 163 grammar schools are attended by some 188,000

- students. Robert Long, Shadi Denechi, and Alpesh Maisuria, *Grammar Schools in England* (House of Commons Library, 2023), <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN07070/SN07070.pdf>.
- <sup>29</sup> See Campaign for State Education (CASE), <https://www.campaignforstateeducation.org.uk/#:~:text=Ever%20since%20its%20inception%20in,criteria%20only%20partially%20at%20best> (accessed September 27, 2024).
- <sup>30</sup> Anne Morris, “Sex Discrimination Act 1975,” in *Women’s Legal Landmarks Celebrating the History of Women and Law in the U.K. and Ireland*, ed. Erika Rackley and Rosemary Auchmuty (Bloomsbury, 2019).
- <sup>31</sup> The 1965 Race Relations Act banned racial discrimination in public places and made the promotion of hatred on grounds of “colour, race, or ethnic or national origins” an offence. The 1968 Act outlawed acts of discrimination within employment, housing, and advertising. See “Race Relations Act of 1965,” U.K. Parliament, <https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/transformingsociety/private-lives/relationships/collections1/race-relations-act-1965/race-relations-act-1965> (accessed September 27, 2024).
- <sup>32</sup> UNESCO, World Conference on Special Needs Education: Access and Quality, Salamanca, Spain: June 7, 1994, <https://www.european-agency.org/sites/default/files/salamanca-statement-and-framework.pdf>.
- <sup>33</sup> UNESCO, Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education, Article 2, 1994, viii.
- <sup>34</sup> Between 1970 and 1997, there were just five years when the Conservatives were not in power: 1974–1979, when Labour Prime Ministers Harold Wilson and James Callaghan held office.
- <sup>35</sup> In 1983, the ILEA produced an antiracist policy statement and guidelines. See ILEA, “The State, Race, and Education in the 1980s,” *Anti-Racist Education: History, Theory, Practice*, November 4, 2019, <https://sesc.hist.cam.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Anti-racist-education-workshop-source-pack.pdf>.
- <sup>36</sup> Sally Tomlinson, “Ethnic Minorities, Citizenship and Education,” in *Beyond Communitarianism*, ed. Jack Demaine and H. Entwistle (Palgrave Macmillan, 1996); and Sandra Taylor, “Equal Opportunities’ Policies and the 1988 Education Reform Act in Britain: Equity Issues in Cultural and Political Context,” *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* 14 (1) (1993): 30–43.
- <sup>37</sup> The Rampton Report, *West Indian Children in Our Schools*, Interim Report of the Committee of Inquiry into the Education of Children from Ethnic Minority Groups (Her Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1981).
- <sup>38</sup> The Swann Report, *Education for All: Report of the Committee of Enquiry into the Education of Children from Ethnic Minority Groups* (Her Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1985).
- <sup>39</sup> Tomlinson, *Race and Education*.
- <sup>40</sup> Ian MacDonald, *The Burnage Report: Murder in the Playground: Report of the Macdonald Inquiry into Racism and Racial Violence in Manchester Schools* (Longsight Press, 1989).
- <sup>41</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>42</sup> Ambalavana Sivanandan, “U.K. Commentary Left, Right and Burnage,” *Race & Class* 30 (1) (1988): 69–74, <https://doi.org/10.1177/030639688803000105>.

- <sup>43</sup> Ian Law and Sarah Swann, “Racism, Ethnicity and Schooling in England,” in *Migrant, Roma and Post-Colonial Youth in Education across Europe: Being “Visibly Different,”* ed. Julia Szalai and Clare Schiff (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 151–166.
- <sup>44</sup> Audrey Osler and Hywel Thomas, Acafess Fellowships, University of Birmingham, <https://research.birmingham.ac.uk/en/projects/acafess-fellowships> (accessed September 27, 2024).
- <sup>45</sup> In 1999, with the creation of the Welsh Assembly, governance of education was devolved to the Department of Education and Science, along with the related area of Welsh language policy. For information about their formal consultation document, see Department of Education and Science, *The National Curriculum: A Consultation Document* (Department of Education and Science, Welsh Office, 1987), <https://www.education-uk.org/documents/des/nc-consultation.html#:~:text=The%20Government%20has%20proposed%20that,art%2C%20music%20and%20physical%20education>.
- <sup>46</sup> Peter Case, Susan Case, and Simon Catling, “Please Show You’re Working: A Critical Assessment of the Impact of OFSTED Inspection on Primary Teachers,” *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 21 (4) (2000): 605–621, <https://doi.org/10.1080/713655370>.
- <sup>47</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>48</sup> William Macpherson, “The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry: Report of an Inquiry by Sir William Macpherson of Cluny. Presented to Parliament by the Secretary of State for the Home Department by Command of Her Majesty, 1999, Cm. 4262-1” (The Stationery Office), [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/277111/4262.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/277111/4262.pdf).
- <sup>49</sup> Mark Ellison QC and Alison Morgan, “Review of Possible Miscarriages of Justice: Impact of Undisclosed Undercover Police Activity on the Safety of Convictions, Report to the Attorney General” (House of Commons, July 16, 2015).
- <sup>50</sup> Home Secretary, “Home Office, Stephen Lawrence Inquiry: Home Secretary’s Action Plan for March 1999” (Home Office, 1999).
- <sup>51</sup> Audrey Osler and Marlene Morrison, *Inspecting Schools for Racial Equality: Ofsted’s Strengths and Weaknesses – A Report of the Commission for Racial Equality* (Trentham, for the Commission for Racial Equality, 2000).
- <sup>52</sup> Ibid., 167–196.
- <sup>53</sup> Audrey Osler, “Education for Democratic Citizenship in a Global Age: Challenges for Policy and Pedagogy,” *Wirkungsforschung zur politischen Bildung im europäischen Vergleich* [Impact Research on Political Education in a European Comparison] (2016): 99; and Audrey Osler, *Human Rights and Schooling: An Ethical Framework for Teaching for Social Justice* (Teachers College Press, 2016).
- <sup>54</sup> Audrey Osler and Aya Kato, “Power, Politics and Children’s Citizenship: The Silencing of Civil Society,” *International Journal of Children’s Rights* 30 (2) (2022): 440–472, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15718182-30020007>.
- <sup>55</sup> New Statesman, “Education’s Inequality Curse,” *The New Statesman*, August 23, 2023.
- <sup>56</sup> Lorna Findlayson, “The Case for Student Salaries,” *The New Statesman*, August 23, 2023, <https://www.newstatesman.com/diary/2023/08/case-for-student-salaries>.
- <sup>57</sup> National Statistics, “Schools, Pupils and their Characteristics (England). Academic Year 2022/23,” Gov.uk, June 8, 2023.