

# 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 of cial 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, 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<sup>1</sup> for all. 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 As4 framework of the right to education developed by Katerina Tomaševska, 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 that 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

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.

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.

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



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 specified 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, affilF1 0 0



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 of several 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. Some remain to this day, disadvantaging most students who do not have access to the grammar schools. Osmond (1977) plans for a national education.



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 pro-*ghetto*.<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 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*, formally 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) 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 inamed 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

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

The government's response to concerns about institutional racism was an action plan that sought to address education as well as police. 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 Metropolitan 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."<sup>52</sup> 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



was highlighted and exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Post-lockdowns, many children have disappeared from official view with many failing to return to



## 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 Tomašević, *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 in vention 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 Schools* (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 (6): 301–320, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0305764900200310>
- <sup>9</sup> Deem, *Women and Schooling*.
- <sup>10</sup> David Benassi, "Father of the Welfare State? Beveridge and the Emergence of the Welfare State," *Sociologia* 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





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 *Britain*, ed. Franka 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 LEA produced an antiracist policy statement and guidelines. See “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

