



# **Opportunity For All**

**How can schooling help?  
by**

**David Miliband MP**

David Miliband MP is the Minister for School Standards. This pamphlet accompanies his speech at the ippr fringe event 'Are We Nearly There Yet' in Bournemouth 2003. The views expressed remain the responsibility of David Miliband and do not necessarily represent the views of ippr.

# Opportunity for All: How Schooling Can Help

**David Miliband MP**

The debate about equality of opportunity, and the social mobility it promotes, goes to the heart of Labour's purposes as a party. Yet ever since Michael Young's famous book *The Age of Meritocracy*, published in 1958, the goal of social mobility has been contested.

On the one hand, it is a founding tenet of the party that every person is of equal worth, that worth not birth should be the basis of personal advance, and that personal advance depends on collective provision as well as individual effort. At the same time, Michael Young's warning, that a world of merit-based snakes and ladders would be nasty and brutish, has given social mobility a bad name.

However, Britain's problem today is clear: not the danger of too much mobility, but the reality of too little. Research from the Cabinet Office shows that in common with many other countries, industrial change has created more 'room at the top' in the form of white collar jobs. This explains the fact that more people born into poor families are making it into the middle class. Yet the relative chances of someone from a poor family making it into the middle class, compared to someone from a professional background, have hardly changed in half a century. In fact, research cited by the Cabinet Office shows that someone born in social class 7 is 5 times less likely to make it into social class 1, than someone born at the top.

The argument of this pamphlet is that when it comes to the combination of impact and deliverability, schooling has unique power to contribute to equality of opportunity. Schooling cannot create an equal society on its own; but unless we make the necessary changes in schooling, and specifically in the way we organise teaching and learning, then we will not make a more equal society.

## **Social (Democratic) Mobility**

The debate about social mobility focuses on the extent of mobility. This is understandable. But there is a prior question: concerning the nature of social mobility, and not just the amount.

An article by American sociologist Ralph Turner, from 1960, makes the point graphically<sup>1</sup>. He identified two kinds of social mobility. Under ‘sponsored mobility’ ‘elite recruits are chosen by the established elite...elite status is given on the basis of some criterion of supposed merit, and cannot be taken by any amount of effort or strategy. Upward mobility is like entry into a private club.’ Turner cited grammar schools and the 11-plus as an example.

By contrast, contest mobility ‘is a system in which elite status is the prize in an open contest and is taken by the aspirants’ own efforts’. The prototype of contest mobility was the US higher education system, with mass entry (but also mass dropout).

For social democrats neither of these forms of social mobility are adequate. Our concern must be to help every person fulfil their potential, and to support them whatever they do achieve. In other words we are content neither for the market to be the sole determinant of people’s fate, nor for their ability – or lack of it – to be so. We have obligations to those who do not succeed as well as those who do.

Education is a direct way of helping people fulfil their potential. Our problem in education is that while average quality is good and rising, for too many our system does not fulfil their potential.

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<sup>1</sup> Ralph Turner, ‘Sponsored Mobility and Contest Mobility and the school System’, *American Sociological Review* 1960 (No 5)

## Education in England: High Quality, Low Equity

There are striking findings from domestic and international surveys about the way in which English education is improving. Ofsted say we have the best generation of teachers ever and we have 25 000 more teachers than six years ago. The PIRLS study of 10 year olds in 35 countries placed English 10 years olds third from the best in literacy. A similar study of 15 year olds placed them fourth best in the world in science, seventh best in maths and eighth best in native language.

But while average standards in education in the UK are high, our old problem of inequality, and especially the link between educational outcome and social class, remains very strong. In fact we are eighth from the bottom of the international league table when it comes to measuring equality of opportunity: the correlation between social class and educational outcome is strong.

For the UK, the contrast is striking. For the top 25 per cent of 15 year-old pupils in terms of social class in the 2002 PISA study, they get the best scores in the world. While the middle two quartiles in the class distribution are fourth and seventh respectively, the poorest 25 per cent are ninth best in the world.

The problem starts young: as early as 22 months according to pioneering research of cognitive ability of very young children<sup>2</sup>. In fact, the child from a poor family judged highly developed by age two has been overtaken by age 6 by the less well-developed child from a rich family. The Government's reforms to primary education hold the socio-economic gap constant between the ages of 7 and 11, but the link between social class and attainment explodes in the early years of secondary education.

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<sup>2</sup> Leon Feinstein, 'Inequality in the Early Cognitive Development of British Children in the 1970 Cohort', *Economica* February 2003 (Vol. 70, No. 1)

## **The Socio-economic Gap**

The link between social class and educational attainment has four main causes: economic, family, neighbourhood and school-based factors.

The economic impact of poverty on education is clear. Pupils can struggle to get access to books, computers and quiet places to study. Their housing and environment impacts on health and lifestyle. Meanwhile parental expectations play a key role: if they have been failed by the education system, then their expectations of their children can be lowered and their engagement with school marred. Finally, neighbourhood factors, from crime to peer groups, can combine to hold down the achievement of pupils, so poverty is passed from one generation to the next.

These economic and social factors explain why the Government's agenda for neighbourhood renewal is so important. Housing, health services, employment, all have a key role to play not just in improving adults' lives but also in transforming the life chances of children. The investment in Sure Start is a down payment on a different sort of future for poor children.

But the fourth factor – the quality of schooling – is direct and powerful. The evidence is clear that educational achievement is correlated with income, so that schools with high percentages of children on Free School Meals in general score lower than those with lower percentages. But it is equally the case that for every free school meal band, there are already schools with high numbers of poor children who are outperforming average performance in the wealthiest schools. For example in terms of the percentage of pupils getting five GCSEs at grade A-C, schools with more than 50 per cent of pupils on Free School Meals are scoring above the average attainment of the richest schools.

### **Schools Breaking the Link of Poverty and Achievement**

In the school league tables published in January 2003, **Sir John Cass secondary school** was the most improved school across the whole of the UK. The percentage of pupils achieving 5 A\* - C passes at GCSE / GNVQ level has increased from 22 per cent in 1998 to 69 per cent in 2002. One of the first comprehensive schools in London, it was built in 1965 and is at the heart of London's East End. About 75 per cent of its pupils are eligible for free school meals. In 1992 only 3.3 per cent of the 150 pupils sitting GCSEs achieved five GCSE passes from A\*-C, and the school struggled to fill its places. Now the specialist language college is over-subscribed.

About a third of the pupils at **Christ's School** in Richmond are eligible for free school meals. As a result of a dramatically falling roll, the school was facing closure in July 1999. New headteacher Gareth Long faced the enormous challenge of turning round parental and community perception. Innovation in staffing – including an Ofsted inspector to focus on teaching and learning and guidance from a behaviour expert – helped 36 per cent of pupils get five A\* - C passes at GCSE / GNVQ in 2002, compared with 13 per cent in 2000.

New research from the US shows the powerful impact of effective teaching and learning on educational achievement. In a study in Tennessee, William Sanders and Sandra P. Horn found that teacher effectiveness is 10 to 20 times as significant as factors such as ethnic make-up and poverty in determining educational outcomes<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> William Sanders and Sandra P. Horn, 'Effective Teachers', *Gifted Child Today Magazine* Nov/Dec 2000 (Vol. 23, Issue 6)

## **How More Schools Can Do More for Equal Opportunity**

If some schools can break the link between poverty and disadvantage, the question is how more can do so. Poverty puts high hurdles in the way of educational achievement. School populations in areas of disadvantage often show high mobility. The culture of achievement in a school can be fragile, as teachers come and go. But success for the young people is possible.

It is clear that money is important. It does not guarantee high achievement, but it is vital to it. The DfES allocates some £2000-2500 to every child in the country, then adds about £1300 to account for additional educational needs arising from poverty, and then multiplies the result by up to about 25 per cent for London and other areas of the country with high recruitment and retention costs.

The result is that when it comes to delivering funds from the DfES to local authorities there is a strong skew in favour of poorer children. It is then for local authorities to distribute money to schools. Some do an outstanding job of targeting resource on disadvantage. But partly because poor children are distributed across a range of schools, the redistributive effect is diluted.

Out-of-school opportunities also make an important difference. For example, the Playing for Success scheme, to which 62 top football and 26 other sports' clubs have signed up, is making a marked difference to achievement, aspirations and attitudes.<sup>4</sup> The gifted and talented

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4 Four national evaluation studies have found significant improvements in literacy, numeracy, ICT skills, and motivation to learn amongst children attending the 78 centres now open. The most recent evaluation found that, on average, primary pupils improved their numeracy scores by an average



programme reached 100,000 young people in disadvantaged areas in the last academic year. These schemes help make up for lack of opportunity at home.

Common sense says that the commitment, behaviour and aspirations of fellow pupils are important to educational performance. Standards of achievement at GCSE have more or less doubled since the introduction of comprehensive schooling. But it is difficult to isolate the effect of selection from other factors on standards<sup>5</sup>. For example, in the 2002 performance tables, grammar schools did well in value-added terms in the early secondary years, while other schools did better in the run-up to GCSE.

But it is critical to understanding of underperformance and inequality that performance varies within schools as well as between them. The extent of variation in performance of students within schools is four times greater at age 15 than variation in performance between schools. In other words young people from poor families fall behind in relatively good schools, as well as because they attend poor schools.

It is for these reasons that the Government puts such emphasis on changing life chances from the classroom – by working to raise the quality of teaching and learning. We have learnt the power of this approach from the experience of literacy and numeracy programmes in primary schools.

We know how much difference primary education makes: 70 per cent of 11 year olds who read, write and count well go on to get five GCSEs grade A-C; the figure for those who do not achieve this level is 12 per cent. Yet in 1998 four LEAs were getting 11 year olds to this level.

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of 17 months and secondary by 24 months.

<sup>5</sup> DfES Memorandum to the Education and Skills Committee on School Admissions (Sept 2003)

Today, after five years of the National Literacy and Numeracy Programmes the figure is 80. The fastest improvements in achievement at Level 4 in primary education have been in the schools with the highest proportion of pupils living in poverty<sup>6</sup>.

At GCSE similar trends are now evident in the Excellence in Cities areas that have received dedicated funding to support six strands of activity to support effective teaching and learning. It is also noteworthy that pupils from poor families seem to be progressing fastest in schools with a high concentration of pupils in poverty: evidence that the drive to target funding and reform on this group is having an effect.

Focussed efforts to raise the quality of teaching and learning have an effect, whatever the intake of the school. This is not to say that there are not important issues in relation to a range of school and neighbourhood factors that hinder school achievement. It is to say that when it comes to the most effective combination of impact and deliverability the focus on the teaching and learning experience itself should be centre stage.

## **Personalised Learning**

For half a century there have been two great conundrums facing Labour education policy.

First, how to combine excellence and equity. It was clear that the grammar school system was inequitable. Sponsored mobility did no justice to the talents of three quarters of the population branded failures at

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<sup>6</sup> The increases in the median English, maths and science performances between 1998 and 2003 of mainstream, maintained school with high proportions of pupils 'known to be eligible for free schools meals' have been above the average national increases.

11. The drive to introduce comprehensive admissions – effectively a shift towards a model of contest mobility – has allowed more young people to achieve<sup>7</sup>. But it remains the case that excellence has too often been isolated, and diversity in quality of provision has constrained equity rather than promoting it.

Second, how to ensure that a universal service responds to the particular needs of individual students. The Conservative answer is to break up the universal service, to encourage private provision. That cannot be our answer. We need instead to use the advantage of universal service – scale, diverse practice, alternative strategies – to help tailor education to the individual needs of student. This is personalised learning.

Personalised learning does not mean every student learning on their own. Of course it involves work in classes and groups. But it does mean rigorous determination to ensure that for every student, their needs are assessed, their talents developed, their interests spurred, their potential fulfilled.

Personalised learning speaks directly to our concern that for too many young people, education fails to overcome disadvantage at home. Personalised learning says that a universal service needs to give extra help to those who need it most. Personalised learning involves the teaching, curriculum and class organisation of schools being designed to reach as many pupils as possible with diverse needs and experiences for as much of the time as possible

Personalised learning is what our most successful schools take as common practice. It has five key features:

1. Assessment for Learning. The starting point for effective

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<sup>7</sup> The percentage of young people getting the equivalent of five good GCSEs has doubled in thirty years

teaching is appropriate diagnosis, with pupil and parental input, of pupil strengths and weaknesses. This is not about more tests. It is about teachers' professional judgement being used as the basis for the design of appropriate learning opportunities for different pupils in a class. Schools that have embraced personalised learning use high expectations and challenging individual targets to stretch and motivate pupils. This offers most benefit to disadvantaged pupils for whom low expectations and aspirations depress attainment.

2. The curriculum. Personalised learning says that the curriculum and timetable needs to be flexible enough to meet their needs. That is why the whole focus of the Tomlinson review of 14-19 education and training is on how to make the system more responsive to the needs of the learner, promoting participation and progression at every stage. In the UK our chronic record of high drop out at 16 has been fuelled by a weak vocational offer and a narrow academic track. This is our opportunity to overcome these problems.
3. Teaching. Many pupils get bored at school because they are ahead of most of the class, or behind. Personalised learning ensures that for whole classes or in smaller groups the pace of work engages pupils. The workforce reform proposals inaugurated this September aim to kill two birds with one stone: bringing a range of adult professionals into schools to take off teachers administrative duties that divert them from teaching, and to offer the tutorial support that experts in music, arts or science, drawn from the local community or students from local universities, can offer.
4. ICT has enormous scope to promote more personalised learning. The evidence is that boys in particular are helped to enjoy the

challenges of schooling by extensive use of ICT<sup>8</sup> and 68 per cent of students now have internet access at home. The rest need to have study support and homework facilities at school. ICT allows every pupil progress at their own pace, delivering creativity to match the way different pupils learn, and allowing pupils to link study at home with school work in clear and easy ways.

5. School Organisation. Personalised learning asks schools to work in new ways to tailor learning to individual need. At the primary level this involves fitting learning to different children's needs, including providing support for children with special educational needs and taking particular steps to serve the needs of gifted and talented children, and ensuring a smooth transition into primary school, between schools and years and into secondary school. At the secondary level the agenda is more wide-ranging: centres of excellence in every school as specialist schooling becomes universal; federations of schools and colleges that allow students to balance general and specialist study; teaching tailored to the needs of pupils, backed by assessment for learning; mentor support for pupils; and innovative approaches to timetabling and the curriculum, which leave teachers free to decide how to teach.

## **Social Democratic Education Settlement**

Labour's education record since the foundation of the party is a mixture of idealism and heroism but also limitations and disappointment. The party has a proud record in extending educational opportunity, from the first lessons of the Workers Education Association to the expansion of secondary education to the Open University. But until 1997 education was never centre-stage for Labour governments.

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<sup>8</sup> Ofsted study: Boys' Achievement in Secondary Schools (July 2003)

The greatest reforming government this century, elected in 1945, oversaw the implementation of the coalition government's 1944 Act, with its commitment to a three tier education system of grammar, secondary modern and technical schools. The 1964 government encouraged the growth of comprehensive schooling but did not effectively address standards of teaching and learning. In 1976 Jim Callaghan announced a 'great debate' on school standards but by 1979 education was not included as one of his top five priorities for the introduction to the Labour election manifesto.

My argument is that the Government's unyielding focus since 1997 on standards of teaching and learning in the classroom marks a decisive break, and holds out for the first time the prospect of a genuinely social democratic education settlement for our country.

Of course there are very tough issues: about funding, about the impact of family disadvantage. But the experience of personalised learning, and the drive to extend it, offers us the opportunity to treat every child as special, with provision to match their talents and their needs.

The foundations of this settlement are clear:

- a clear pathway for every pupil through the education system, from the commitments in Sure Start to ensure every child is ready to learn at age 5 to the wide range of choices that will soon be on offer at 14 to 19
- a commitment to informed teacher professionalism as the foundation for school improvement, with the pay, support, leadership and training appropriate to a modern profession
- every school with the legal and financial flexibility to adapt provision to local needs, and an accountability framework of

inspection and performance information that rewards achievement

- and central government committing the resource, the priority and the moral purpose to give real leadership to the system.

This is a vision of equity and excellence worth fighting for; schooling can help deliver opportunity for all.

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