

Generic issues in schools

Introductory note

It may appear equalities legislation is becoming more and more complicated and burdensome. The consequence could be that schools and other public bodies concentrate more on minimal compliance than on observing and implementing its legislation's spirit.

This paper aims to make the issues manageable at school level. It has two parts:

A: A summary of the principal features which all the legislative strands have in common.

B: A list of generic tasks and challenges for governing bodies and senior leadership teams.

A: A SUMMARY OF THE PRINCIPAL FEATURES WHICH ALL THE LEGISLATIVE STRANDS HAVE IN COMMON

Similarity 1

Stories of struggle

Each equality strand has its own inspiring story – struggles, campaigns, demonstrations, behind-the-scenes lobbying, reasoned advocacy; iconic events and turning points; legal landmarks; emotive and distinctive slogans and catchphrases; and solidarity, solace, determination, personal friendships. The distinctiveness of each strand's story gives it strength and must be cherished.

However, there are both pragmatic and principled reasons why the cherishing of distinctive history needs to be combined with bringing and holding the strands together. To continue the metaphor, the strands must be woven into a single rope, bearing and exerting more weight together than any one strand could on its own.

Similarity 2

All people stand to benefit

It is relevant to bear in mind ramps, those architectural features that facilitate access to public buildings for people using wheel-chairs. When these were first required by law, there was a certain amount of muttering about political correctness. Was it really defensible, people asked, to spend so much money on items that would benefit only a small numerical minority, those who use wheel-chairs?

But actually, of course, ramps are of great value to lots of other people as well – parents, grandparents and other carers with infants in buggies, and anyone with a heavy suitcase on wheels, and anyone temporarily affected by a sprained ankle, or feeling a bit weary. Everyone also benefits from ramps in a rather invisible or philosophical way. For ramps subliminally remind people, every time they see one, regardless of whether they actually use it, that they live in a society that recognises, accommodates and welcomes difference – not just differences with regard to mobility but many other kinds of difference as well. Everyone benefits from living in such a society, for everyone belongs to a minority of one sort or another.

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And in the other strands too, adjustments made for a numerical or power-less minority are of potential or actual benefit for the majority as well. For example, adjustments to teaching methods to accommodate pupils for whom English is an additional language are likely to help all pupils develop the academic skills they need. Measures to promote gender equality are of benefit to boys as well as girls, and measures to promote sexuality equality are likely to develop sensitivity and self-awareness in all people, including those who are straight.

The social model of disability is relevant, appropriately modified, for a wide range of situations and contexts. On its website the Centre for Studies on Inclusive Education (CSIE) quotes the co-director of the Centre for Equity in Education at the University of Manchester: 'A detailed consideration of the barriers experienced by some pupils can help us to develop forms of schooling that will be more effective for all pupils.'

Similarity 3

Underlying principles

The same ethical and procedural principles apply in all the strands. Therefore, each can learn from insights, emphases and good ideas in each of the others in relation to matters such as the following.

Equality: All people are of equal value and should be treated with equal respect, consideration and dignity.

Difference and reasonable accommodation: People have a range of different interests, needs and experiences, and reasonable adjustments for these should be made.

Cohesion and equality of belonging: Positive attitudes, relationships and interaction should be fostered, and a shared sense of cohesion and belonging. Therefore, steps should be taken to prevent and address prejudice-related incidents and harassment

The social model of disadvantage: Social models of disadvantage should be used, not deficit models – discrimination is caused by structures, systems, attitudes and opinions in society, not by the characteristics of people who are discriminated against.

Involvement and consultation: People affected by a policy or activity should be consulted and involved in the design of new policies, and in the review of existing ones – 'nothing about us without us'.

Participation: All people must be enabled to take a full part in economic, political, social and cultural life at local and national levels.

Evidence and transparency: Policies should be based on reliable evidence and the evidence must be publicly available. Most importantly of all, evidence should be about equalities and inequalities of outcome.

The complexity of identity: All people have multiple identities, loyalties and sense of belonging – no one is just one thing.

Impacting assessments: Whenever new policies or practices are introduced, and whenever existing ones are reviewed, an assessment should be made of their possible impacts, positive as well as negative, on equalities of outcome.

Social class: Class is not mentioned explicitly in equalities legislation. However, inequalities of outcome and opportunity in relation to age, ethnicity, disability, faith, gender and sexual identity cannot be meaningfully addressed independently of inequalities in relation to social class.

Action: Principles are not enough. There must also be action.

Similarity 4

Allies

With regard to all the strands it is important to foster and develop the qualities, skills and insights of allies – people who are not themselves directly affected by disadvantage, inequality and discrimination but who, through their actions and advocacy, give moral, political and practical support to those who are.

Similarity 5

International contexts

Each strand has developed in an international context, including successive European directives and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Similarity 6

Classroom methods and practical approaches

All the strands have in common that there are implications not only for *what* is taught but also for *how* it is taught.

Similarity 7

Language and political correctness

In all the strands there are concerns to develop the most appropriate language to describe reality and perceptions, and there are worries about so-called political correctness.

Similarity 8

Issues of identity, and 'me-first' and 'us-first'

All the strands necessarily involve feelings about, and understandings of, people different from oneself. They also, therefore, involve feelings and understandings about one's own identity and about the nature of the groups to which one belongs. Such self-understandings frequently involve mixed loyalties. In educational settings it is frequently more important, in the first instance, to consider one's own identity rather than that of others – 'us' rather than 'them'. By the same token, there is often a need for single-identity groups – women-only groups and shortlists, for example, and single-sex teaching groups.

Similarity 9

Whole-school management and leadership

All the strands of equality and diversity depend on clear, explicit and robust leadership. For example, addressing the challenges listed in Part B of this paper requires the attention and active, visible involvement of all members of a school's senior leadership team.

B: A LIST OF GENERIC TASKS AND CHALLENGES FOR GOVERNING BODIES AND SENIOR LEADERSHIP TEAMS.

1. Equality of outcome

Planning and implementing programmes which will close the gaps in achievement between relevant groups, and increase the participation of under-represented groups in higher and further education.

2. Equality of participation

Planning and implementing programmes which will close gaps participation and involvement, for example increasing the participation of girls in science and mathematics, and the participation of boys in literacy-based subjects.

3. Equality of belonging

Enabling all pupils to feel they belong to their school, are known and respected, and have a stake in the school's well-being and flourishing.

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4. Curriculum coverage

Including equality and diversity issues and positive images of under-represented groups in curriculum materials, modules and topics, wherever possible and appropriate.

5. Understanding of law and concepts

Ensuring all members of the school community understand the requirements of legislation, and also certain essential concepts, for example the social model of disability.

6. Involvement and consultation

Ensuring that members of under-represented groups are involved in the design and implementation of measures and projects intended to be of benefit of them – ‘nothing about us without us’ – and listening to their views and voices.

7. The formation of allies

Fostering and developing the qualities, skills and insights of allies – people who are not themselves directly affected by discrimination and inequality but who give moral, political and practical support to those who are.

8. The public life of the school

Involving pupils with a wide range of backgrounds and characteristics in the public life of the school.

9. Whole-school approaches

Ensuring senior leadership teams and governing bodies give a strong and explicit lead, both in written documents and in oral communications of various kinds, and in their presence at, and participation in, significant events.

10. Evidence and information

Collecting and using a range of quantitative and qualitative evidence, and maintaining a robust information base, to show the extent and nature of progress towards greater equality.

11. Objectives and action plans

Creating and regularly reviewing plans for creating greater equality, and reporting on progress to governing bodies.

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Source: Adapted from *Holding Together: equalities, difference and cohesion, a resource for school improvement planning*, Trentham Books for Derbyshire Education Authority, summer 2009

On the next page there is a chart which can be used to summarise a school’s overall plan, and specific objectives within it.

EQUALITIES IN SCHOOLS – AN OVERVIEW OF TASKS AND CHALLENGES

| | Disability and special educational needs | Ethnicity and faith, belief and religion | Gender and sexual identity |
|--|--|---|---|
| 1. Equality of outcome Closing gaps in achievement | | | |
| 2. Equality of take-up Closing gaps in participation | | | |
| 3. Equality of belonging Enabling all feel they belong | | | |
| 4. Curriculum coverage Direct and indirect | | | |
| 5. Understanding of law Ensuring all know the requirements | | | |
| 6. Involvement Ensuring all are consulted | | | |
| 7. The formation of allies People who give moral, political and practical support | | | |
| 8. The school's public life Involving pupils with a wide range of backgrounds | | | |
| 9. Whole-school approaches Strong and explicit lead from heads and governors | | | |
| 10. Monitoring and review Collecting and using a range of evidence | | | |
| 11. Action plans Creating and regularly reviewing plans | | | |

Please note: The tasks and challenges in the left hand column are described in more detail on earlier pages of this paper. The idea is that schools can use a chart such as this as an aide-memoire when setting and reviewing their equality objectives in relation to national legislation.