



Embracing equity as a core part of
school improvement



THERE'S a huge debt I owe to a municipal refuse van. It was while working as a bin man for a London borough as a teenager in the 1980s that I was forced to re-evaluate my life.

I'll never forget trudging home, often cold and soaking wet having worked in all kinds of weather, exhausted from dragging and lifting the bins.

It was this experience that instilled in me a growing desire to better myself.

This was a difficult time. My parents split up when I was 15, and I went off the rails, playing truant from school and ending up in shared accommodation on social security.

The conflict and turmoil I experienced on the streets of west London hit me hard.

On one occasion, my Asian friends and I were set upon by a gang of racist skinheads. On another I was threatened with a knife.

To make ends meet, I took all sorts of manual jobs, including stints as a road sweeper and a kitchen cleaner.

What proved my salvation was education. It was the escape route from wage poverty and welfare dependency.

Eventually, with the encouragement of friends and family, I went back to school, sat my A-levels and won a place at Sheffield University to read physics.

I loved studying so much that I stayed on to study for a PhD in theoretical physics and then gained a Master's degree at Imperial College, London.

Through the confidence gained from my qualifications, I became a journalist, author, charity executive and academic.

It's been quite a journey from bin man to prof. But it has been the unconventional nature of that personal odyssey that has fuelled the overarching theme of my varied career - to build a better and fairer education system and to nurture aspiration.

Because I am living proof that background, no matter how disadvantaged, should not decide an individual's fate.

Advancement is within everyone's grasp - as long as they get the right support and the opportunity.

Having been given a second chance myself, I recognise that, at its best, education can be both a great leveller and a vehicle for a fairer society.

That is why so much of my work has been devoted to the cause of social mobility, whether in my former role as chief executive of The Sutton Trust - which promotes equality of opportunity in education - and now as Britain's first Professor of Social Mobility.

It is a sad indictment of modern Britain that my job exists at all but, after decades of progress, social mobility has stagnated in recent years because of rising educational and societal inequalities.

Tragically, the Covid pandemic has worsened this problem.

Repeated lockdowns, school

I went from binman to professor... I know how vital it is to help bridge Britain's digital divide



Success story: Lee Elliot Major. Above: As a teenager in the 1980s

up a little or a lot of lost teaching hours. In contrast, only 29 per cent of those in the bottom fifth of earners expressed the same belief.

WITH such inconsistent provision of online teaching during the pandemic, it's no wonder that the achievement gap in education between rich and poor is widening, impacting social mobility.

Such learning losses could affect a whole generation, squandering talent, undermining ambition, increasing unemployment and hurting the economy.

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University of Exeter
Former CEO, Sutton Trust
Founding Trustee, EEF



University
of Exeter

UNCOVERING THE RIGGED RACE
FOR OPPORTUNITY AND THE FIGHT
FOR A FAIRER WORLD

Cracking the Class Code



LEE ELLIOT-MAJOR
& ANNE-MARIE SIM

A practical guide for teachers

EQUITY IN EDUCATION

Levelling the
playing field
of learning

LEE ELLIOT MAJOR AND EMILY BRIANT



 **JOHN CATT**
FROM HODDER EDUCATION



A PELICAN
BOOK

Social Mobility And Its Enemies

Lee Elliot Major and
Stephen Machin



Equity
approach

Societal challenges

Equity principles

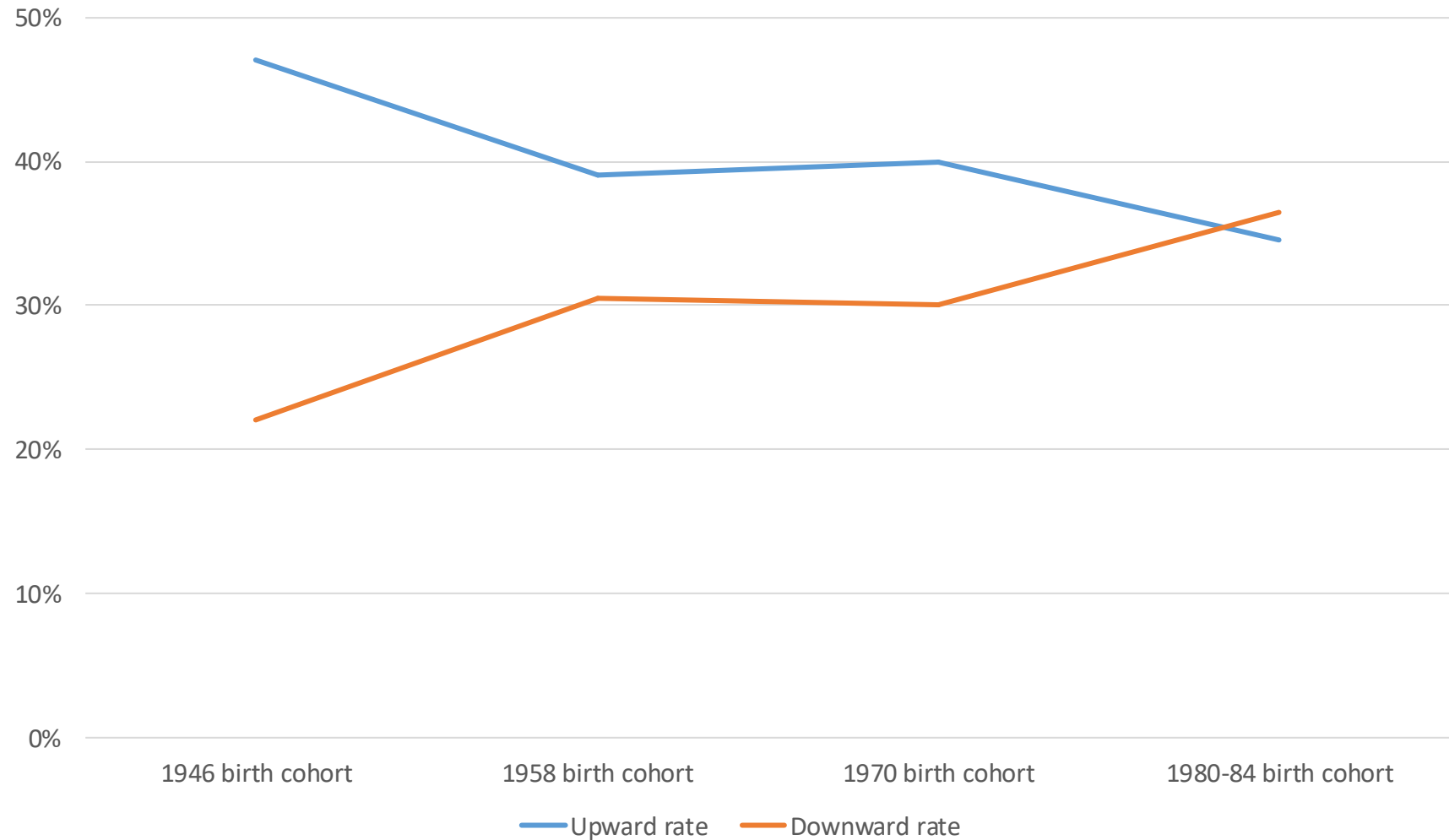
Equity bets

Crisis in Opportunity

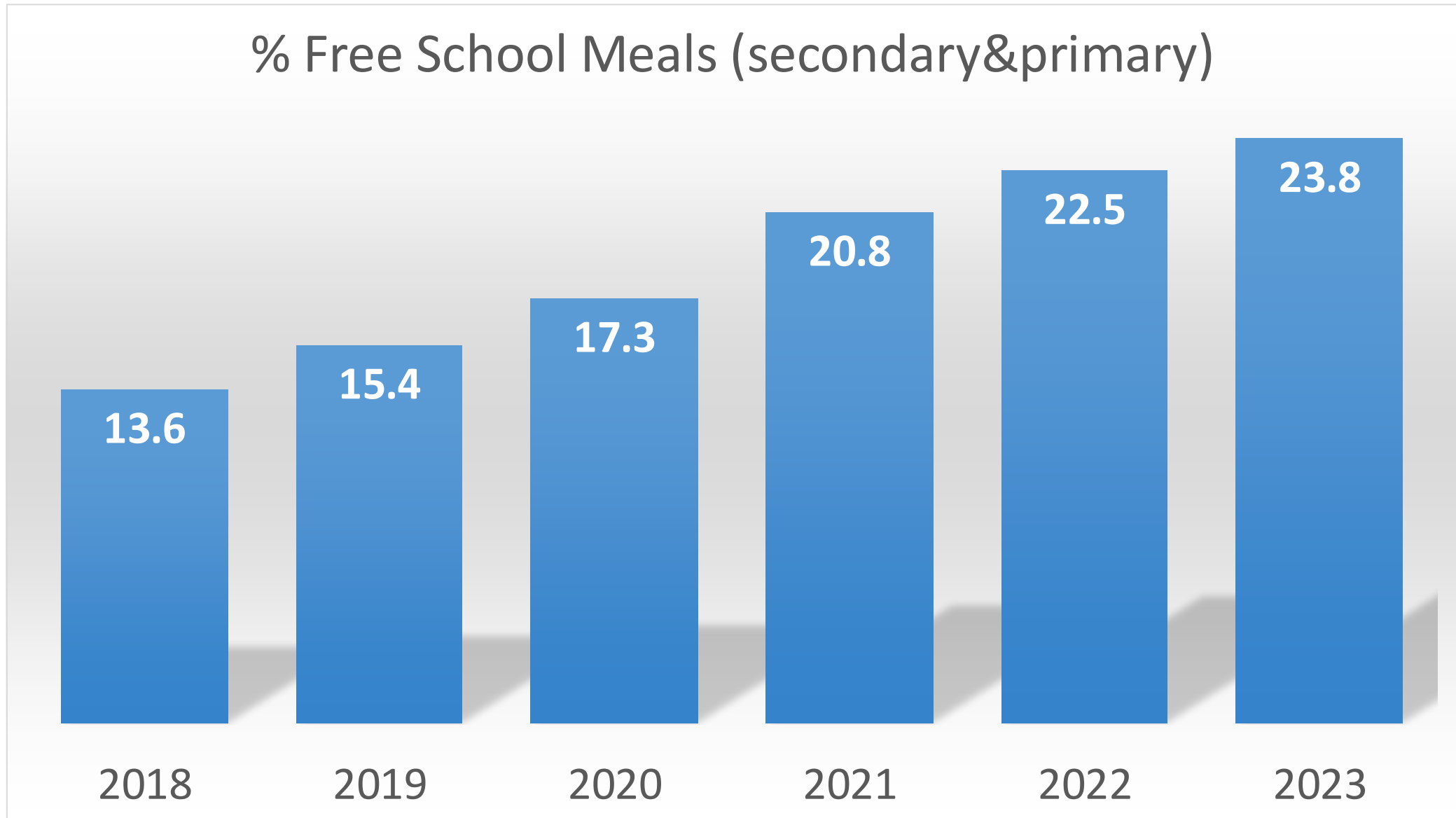


Era of social descent

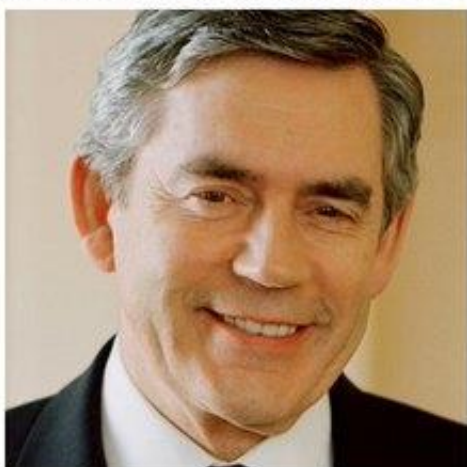
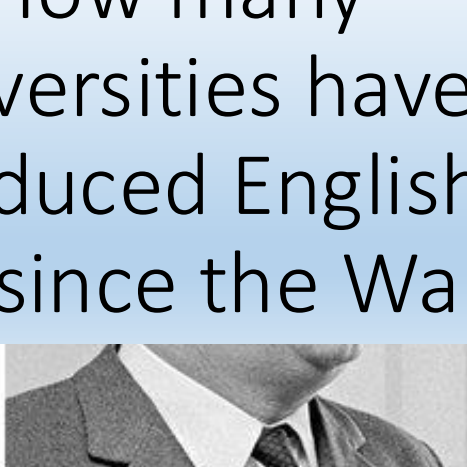
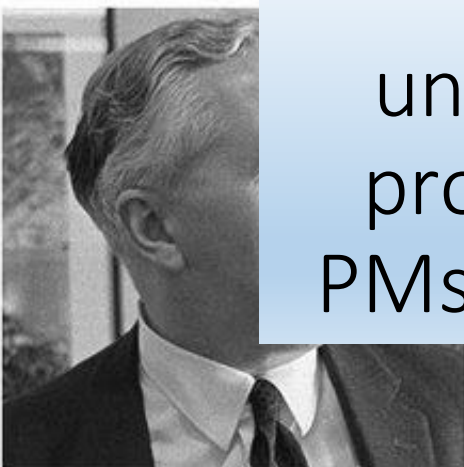
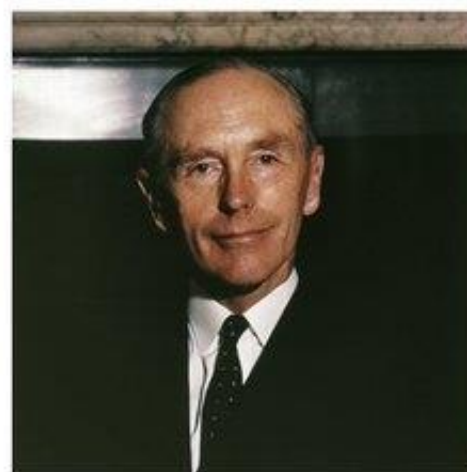
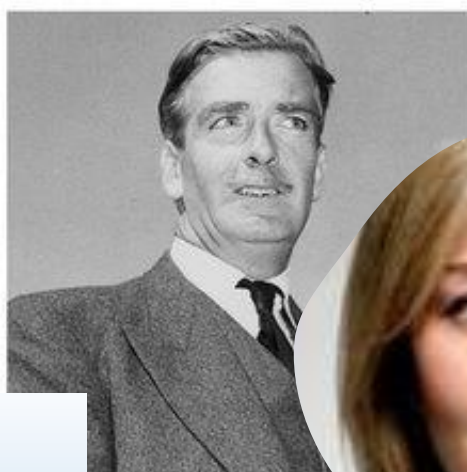
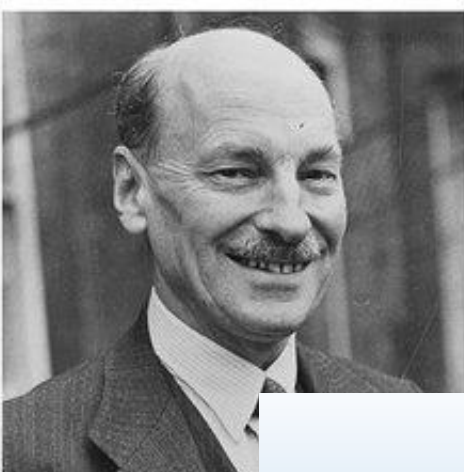
Upward and downward social mobility rates by birth cohort – men, at age 27



Growing child poverty in England



How many universities have produced English PMs since the War?



The 3 D's – today's defining class divide



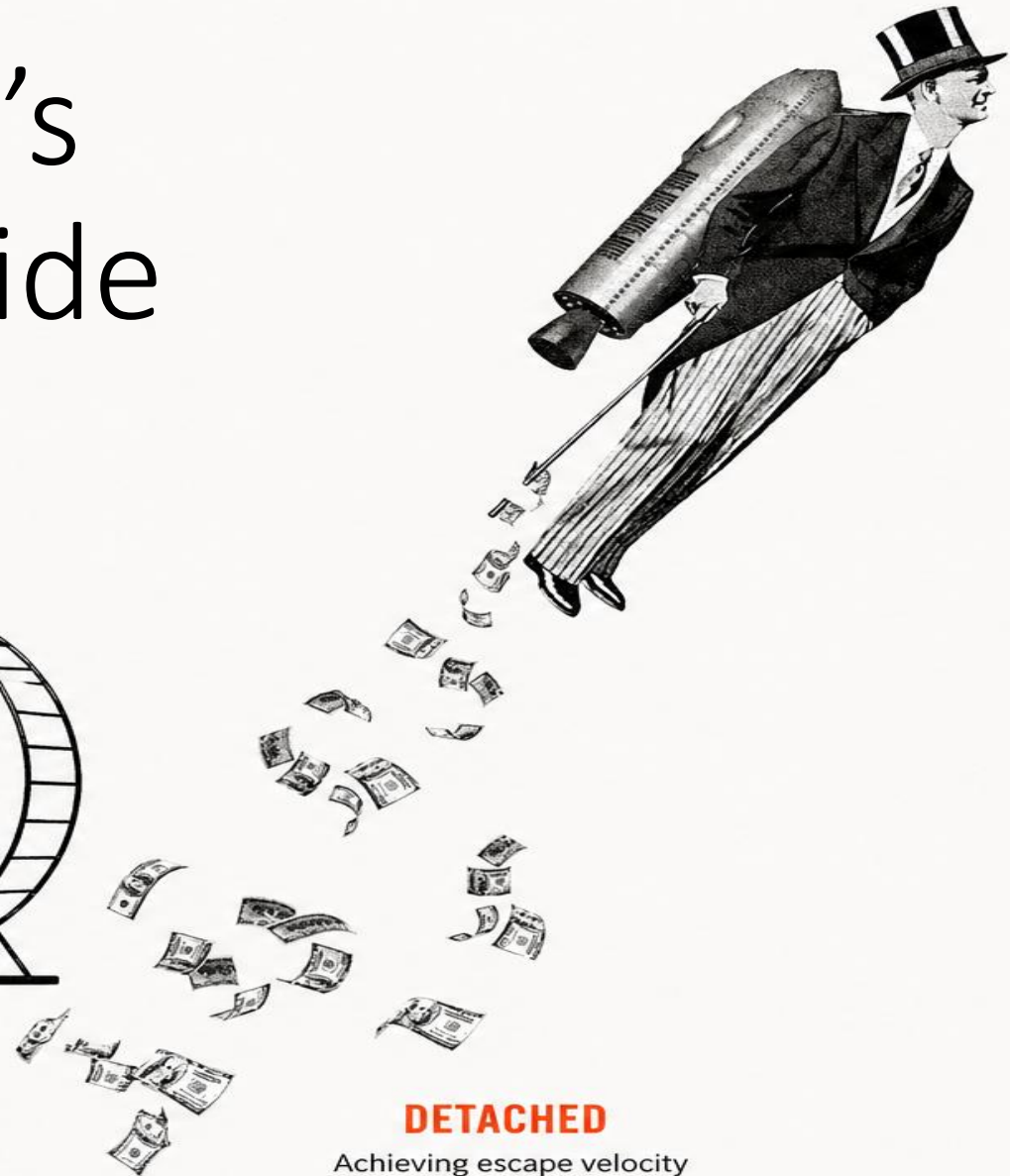
DISPOSSESSED

Paddling to stay afloat



DISENCHANTED

Running to stand still



DETACHED

Achieving escape velocity

THE SHADOW EDUCATION SYSTEM



\$100bn+

GLOBAL PRIVATE
TUTORING MARKET

1 IN 3

CHILDREN FROM
ADVANTAGED FAMILIES
RECEIVE PRIVATE TUTORING

1 IN 20

CHILDREN FROM THE
POOREST FAMILIES
RECEIVE PRIVATE TUTORING

Equity principles



A practical guide for teachers

EQUITY IN EDUCATION

Levelling the
playing field
of learning

LEE ELLIOT MAJOR AND EMILY BRIANT

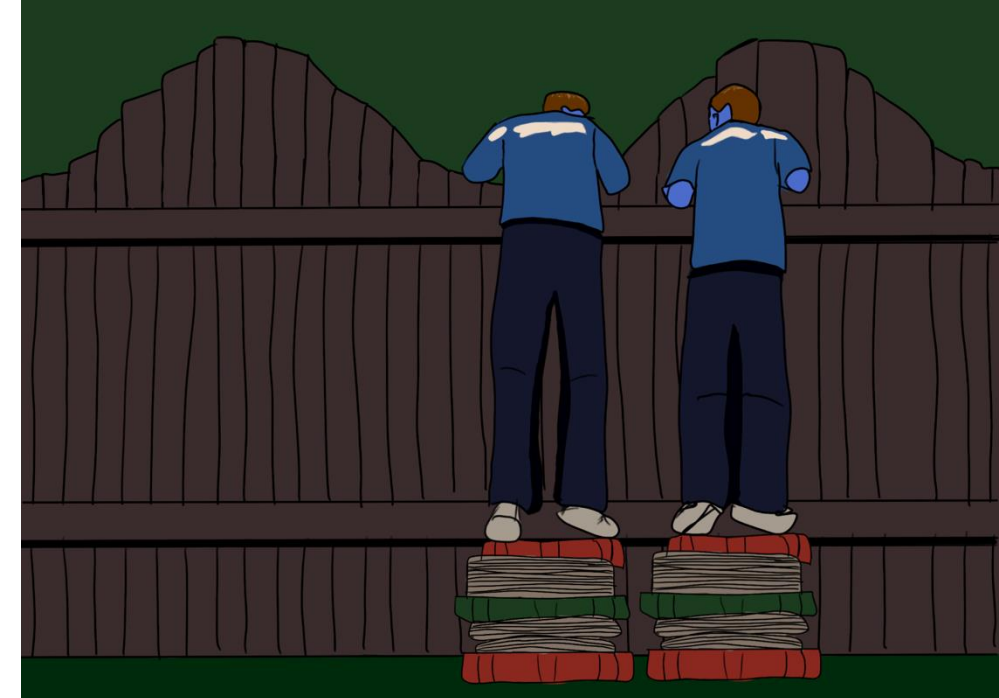


 **JOHN CATT**
FROM HODDER EDUCATION

**‘Comprehensive and
ground-breaking.’
Dylan Wiliam**

**Amazon’s ‘Hot New
Releases in Education’.**

**‘A must read for every
educator and educational
bureaucrat.’**



2. Challenging deficit mindsets

In the world of deficit thinking, education efforts feel like a very one-sided negotiation – we want you to come into our world, change who you are, fit into our culture, and play by our (unwritten) rules.

Instead, we need to meet children (& people) halfway and find out what every person can offer, what we need to change, and how we can work together.

3. Spotlight on social class

- Socio-economic background remains the most powerful predictor of school grades
- Intersects with race, ethnicity, gender, vulnerabilities & other characteristics
- Children face cultural as well as material barriers to learning

	Child-Rearing Approach	
	Concerted Cultivation	Accomplishment of Natural Growth
Key Elements	Parent actively fosters and assesses child's talents, opinions, and skills	Parent cares for child and allows child to grow
Organization of Daily Life	Multiple child leisure activities orchestrated by adults	'Hanging out,' particularly with kin, by child
Language Use	Reasoning/directives Child contestation of adult statements Extended negotiations between parents and child	Directives Rare questioning or challenging of adults by child General acceptance by child of directives
Interventions in Institutions	Criticisms and interventions on behalf of child Training of child to take on this role	Dependence on institutions Sense of powerlessness and frustration Conflict between child-rearing practices at home and at school
Consequences	Emerging sense of entitlement of the part of the child	Emerging sense of constraint on the part of the child

Concerted cultivation

Lareau (2002)

Good bets



Embracing
an equity
approach

Language

Pedagogy

Curriculum

Partnerships

Language of Equity

Children from **under-resourced backgrounds** (not disadvantaged pupils)

Reflecting on biases

Teachers tend to judge working-class pupils as lower academic achievers than their actual test grades would suggest; they tend to give more generous judgements to more privileged pupils.

See for example: Olczyk, M. et al. (2022); Doyle et al. (2023)

Class Bias in the Curriculum: cultural framing of core knowledge

- Geography questions on skiing holidays
- References to lake cottages and golf clubs in comprehension tests.
- Creative writing prompts on rocking horses, jam-making, or family theatre trips.
- Maths questions based on mortgages, savings interest, or buying a house.

Parent partnerships

- Consider home visits – can be powerful ways of developing relationships and debunking assumptions
- Neutral spaces – community hubs, ‘nan’s front room’
- Flip power-balance of teacher- parent meetings to get them talking, consider nurturing home learning

Equity case studies



School equity strategies

Relationships First

Bligh • Q3 • Torquay
Home visits
Family partnerships

Relentless Focus on Disadvantage

Dawlish • Torquay
Red Flags Review
Weighted
Entitlement

Removing Barriers to Learning

Broadwindsor •
Torquay
Homework clubs
Reading support

Building Belonging

Ilfracombe Junior
Place-based
curriculum
Community pride

Strengths-Based Language

Palladian/ThinkForward
Asset-based approaches
High expectations

Supporting Transitions

Brigshaw • Q3
Transition festivals
Continuity &
belonging

Common ingredients

Precise problems

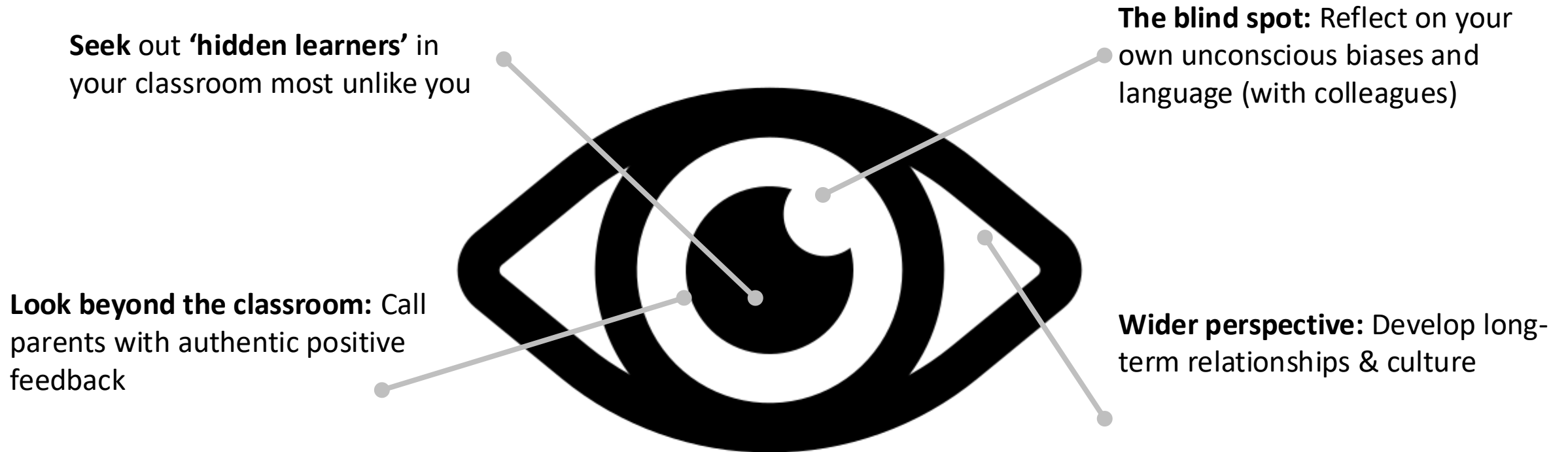
Relationships first

Intentional prioritisation

It's the culture, stupid!

Expect resistance

Adopting an 'equity lens'

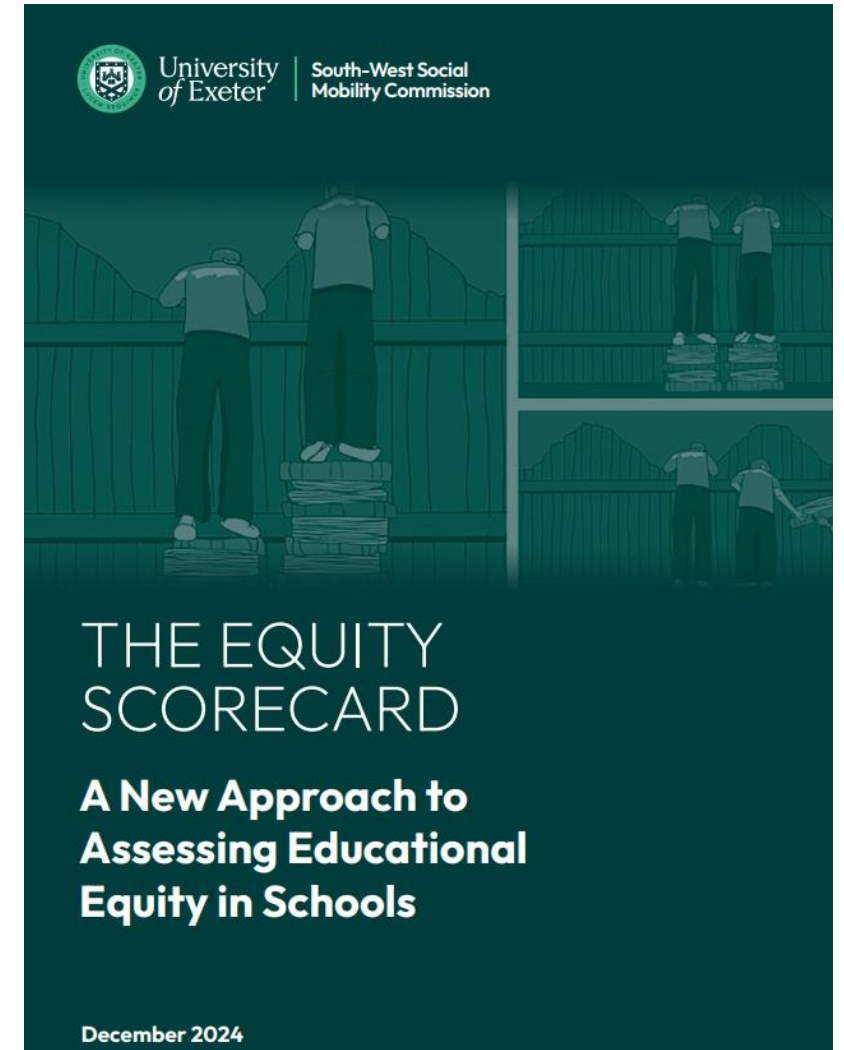


"For many, the discussions generated by the Scorecard were their most productive leadership conversations of the year. The process helped us challenge assumptions that had gone unquestioned for years."

Equity Scorecard: self-assessment tool for schools

Equity partnerships with trusts and groups of schools

Executive education module for equity leaders





Equity is the discipline of looking beyond what is easiest to see.

Equity is not an add-on to school improvement.
It is school improvement.

“ *If you continuously fail, then you gradually realize that you have got to change something.*

— Richard Feynman



BEYOND OUR
SCHOOL GATES



SEE THE CHILD,
NOT THE DATA



UNDERSTAND
THE BARRIERS



FIND THE REAL
CAUSES

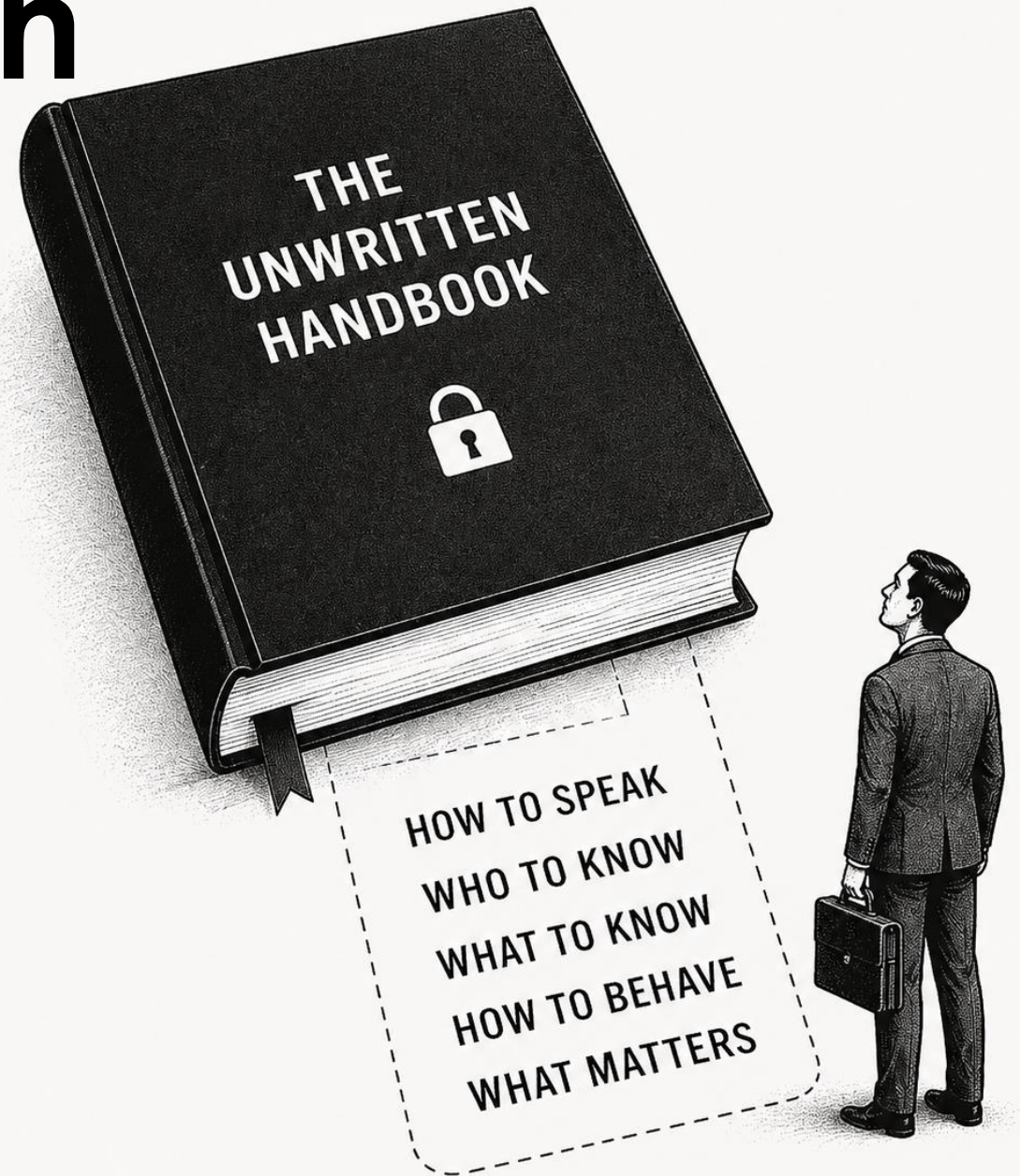


Exeter 'win win win' tutoring

1. Foundational literacy tutoring for Year 8s
2. Uni students gain degree credits for tutoring
3. Wider civic & education benefits

Unlocking talent in the workplace

- Those who thrive have absorbed these rules long before they enter the workplace.
- We confuse cultural fit with pure merit.



Questions



Appendices



Language



Mending a broken tongue

- Agree 'strengths based' language guide: consistent respectful terminology for pupils and parents
- Ensure all communications with parents are accessible & free of education jargon
- Avoid simplistic/single labels for individual children

Asset based Language (Think Forward)

Do say	Don't say
Young people	Kids
Underserved, under-resourced	Disadvantaged, underprivileged, troubled
Young people with special educational needs or disabilities	SEND young people
At risk of being excluded from school	Disengaged
Person with a learning disability	Mentally handicapped, mentally disabled
Person with autism	Suffering from autism
Global majority	BAME, ethnic minority

Pedagogy



Students under-rated in maths at age 7 by teachers if..

summer born

behavioural/conduct problems

parents don't have degrees

teachers report parents not interested in school

Strengths of children who grow up in adversity

Resilience

Collaborative skills

Quick-thinking

Empathy

Strategies

- Detailing at school level the unique mix of barriers and backgrounds individual pupils face
- Reflecting/identifying strengths of children from different under-resourced backgrounds
- Ensuring authentic positive feedback for pupils from under-resourced backgrounds

Curriculum



Rebalancing curriculum to
celebrate people from all
backgrounds & blend of
contemporary and
traditional culture



Examples

- Specific dedicated awards ceremony for school values
- Maths questions on debts and rent not savings and mortgages
- Invite local people doing local jobs into your school alongside more academic successes

Parent partnerships



Parent partnerships

- Co-develop a parent partnership plan with families, focusing on trust and deepening relationships.
- Prioritise accessible, two-way communication, avoiding jargon and unnecessary formality
- Support parents with practical, realistic strategies at home that focus on routines not direct instruction.

Parent partnerships

- Flip power-balance of teacher- parent meetings to get them talking, consider nurturing home learning
- Neutral spaces – community hubs, ‘nan’s front room’
- Consider home visits – can be powerful ways of developing relationships and debunking assumptions
- Middle and senior leaders take on role of a corporate/advocate parent for some pupils

Teacher reflections

Home visits have been powerful, but at first we caused chaos being people in suits turning up with folders - kids on bikes shouting “it’s the feds” at us.

As school leaders we need to consider equity in every conversation, every decision – the challenge is ensuring consistency across our schools

We have found that relationships can be nurtured with parents by using a neutral space or hub, for us built around a food bank, but now involving lots of other services that help many who can be very isolated at home.

For the first teacher-parent meeting (for Year 7s) we ask parents to talk about their children – they know much more about their children than we can ever do at this stage