

Education in Britain is failing to equalise people's life chances

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The educational system in the UK has lost sight of its crucial role in equalising the life chances for everyone in society according to a leading academic from the University of Birmingham.

Professor Stephen Gorard, who is delivering the 2008 Priestly Lecture today (8th October 2008), will say that current system is failing to reduce the impact family background - has on educational success and job prospects.

He will also warn that the principles that have underpinned state-funded education since 1944 are at risk of being lost in a culture that focuses on purported standards of attainment and an emphasis on qualifications.

The lecture is part of a day of events organised by the School of Education to celebrate the 60th anniversary of the University's academic journal Educational Review. Later in the day Professor Madeleine Arnot, University of Cambridge will be delivering the Educational Review Guest Lecture.

This will focus on the experiences the children of asylum seekers face in the British educational system and the struggles of teachers to sustain social integration against the most difficult of odds.

Professor Gorard comments: "The principle behind offering free education is to reduce the links between family background (resources), educational attainment, and later life chances.

However, the overwhelming evidence is that education does not have that impact. In fact, in some ways it increasingly reinforces the importance of background.

Recent changes to the system in Britain and abroad have placed the focus on achieving qualifications at the expense of trying to improve life chances for those most in need.

Focusing on standards of attainment and league tables should be a means to an end not the end itself. Sadly it seems that the principles that underpinned the move to state funded education have been lost along the way."

The lecture will also propose a number of potential solutions including: eliminating league tables and changing the way new school places are allocated to create greater equity.

Professor Gorard will also call for higher quality research to inform policy in education:

"Education is an area that needs high quality research to inform decision making.

Unfortunately much of the research is driven by policy makers rather than being an independent and impartial assessment of the issues. Changes in our educational system should be driven by detailed evaluations, as clinical trials inform changes to treatments in the health service."

Professor Ian Grosvenor Head of the School of Education adds: "In the 60 years since Educational Review was founded there have been seismic changes in the education system.

Now more than ever there is a need to provide quality educational research that influences government policy and improves education and we want to tackle some of current issues like the future of special needs education or education in developing countries."

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Notes to Editors

For further information about the day's events – visit the School of Education's [website \(http://www.education.bham.ac.uk/\)](http://www.education.bham.ac.uk/):

Stephen Gorard

Professor Stephen Gorard is Professor of Education Research at the University of Birmingham. His research promoting equity within education systems lifelong appears regularly in the media. He acts as consultant or adviser to a number of national and international bodies. His books include *Overcoming the Barriers to Higher Education* (2007), *Adult Learning in the Digital Age* (2006), and *Schools Markets and Choice Policies* (2003). He has written widely on the quality and relevance of education research in general.

Educational Review

The Educational Review journal was first published in 1948 and the foreword was written by the then Vice Chancellor, Sir Raymond Priestley. We have had many prominent authors publish articles in the journal since 1948. The journal is owned by the University of Birmingham (School of Education) and we retain all copyright. This year we celebrate the 60th anniversary of the journal. The journal was recently digitalised and we are now able to offer all the articles published from 1948-2008 (onwards) online.