

# Making a Positive Difference

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## Executive summary

### Executive summary

#### The Project – ‘Making a Positive Difference’:

Research findings to date suggest that alignment with existing policy conceptions of equitable practice alone will not foster the shifts in understanding and practice that are required to address differential attainment amongst school pupils (Drew and Watson, 2014; l’Anson and Eady 2017). In an attempt to make a positive difference in this respect, the project ‘Making a Positive Difference’ (hereafter, MPDP@SU) was set up at Stirling University in 2018, under the auspices of the Scottish Government’s funded research (HE section, administered by the Scottish Council of the Deans of Education) to address the ‘Scottish Attainment Challenge’ (SAC).

MPDP@SU seeks to engage with education professionals (up to 12 teacher-participants) rather than with young people directly. Education professionals in Scottish schools are currently tasked with translating policy directives relating to equity and equitable practice into school contexts without clear frameworks for achieving a confident, critical and imaginative grasp of the underlying concepts being mobilised within this government-led initiative.<sup>1</sup> MPDP@SU draws on cohorts of teacher-participants who are registered on the MSc programme in Professional Education and Leadership at Stirling University. Within this programme, the module ‘Promoting Equity: theory, principles and critique’, was designed specifically in 2018, to allow teacher-participants to explore different understandings of equity (in relation to theory, policy and practice), and also ways in which this might have implications for supporting mentees and student teachers. One aim of the module and the project more broadly, is thus to inform and promote broader changes relating to equity, within participants’ communities of practice.

In spite of limitations imposed because of COVID19, the research team has been able to draw some initial conclusions from its work with the cohort of teachers that has completed the ‘Promoting Equity’ module during this academic year (2019-20). Research data collected so far in this context, apart from the more informal content of class (face to face and online) discussion, includes a review of work produced for assessment in this module. On this basis alone, the course of study undertaken can be shown to have heightened practitioners’ awareness of new theoretical approaches to (in)equity and strengthened their capacity to connect such approaches with their own pedagogical practice. This suggests they will be able to deal more critically, imaginatively and confidently with equity-related issues within their communities of practice, both through innovative pedagogical practice and through mentoring student and beginning teachers in how to understand and handle aspects of this government-led policy.

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<sup>1</sup> Thus, we also suggest that university space might be utilised more extensively as fruitful contexts for the ongoing work of critical, imaginative and creative re-imagining that is clearly necessary across the careers of education professionals.

Whilst some of the empirical data collection involved in this project has been delayed by circumstances related to COVID19, the MPDP@SU project team is developing a book that will form one of the project's key research outputs. *Promoting Equity* will be a useful resource for practitioners, providing access to the resources and learning offered by the 'Promoting Equity: theory, principles and critique' module and benefitting from the insights and contributions of its current student cohort, who will become a reference group throughout its production.

### **Subsidiary observations relating to the impact of COVID19 on issues of equity:**

As a result of restrictions caused by COVID19, limiting empirical research – interviewing stakeholders and classroom observations – and increasing work-related burdens on teacher-participants, aspects of MPDP@SU have been modified. Modifications relate to moving interviews online and postponing elements of classroom observation and discussion with other stakeholders for the purposes of determining impact, to a potential 'second stage'.

In addition to its impact on the MPDP@SU research design, changes wrought by COVID19 have altered the research setting itself. Through engagement with teacher-participants over this period, we have noted how practices previously considered unimaginable have been implemented (Latour, 2020). Reliance on digital platforms for the transmission of teaching, with the attendant potential for intergenerational learning and parental engagement, may have long-term implications for the way in which school boundaries, homework and cooperation with parents are conceived, designed or expanded. In terms of equity, however, correspondingly significant issues have emerged regarding equitable access to learning spaces, resources and technology, as well as the potential impact of variable degrees of parental engagement or distraction.

The COVID19 crisis has also intensified reflection on the responsibility of schools to mitigate social and welfare harms as well as deliver educational outcomes. Concerns regarding the wellbeing of vulnerable pupils during school closures have implications for understanding the limits of what can be achieved by education professionals in 'closing the gap'. The objectives of the SAC project as a whole invite questions, in the current emergency, as to how far a particular professional competence is able to address the whole range of young peoples' complex needs. Our teacher-participants have shown great awareness of the opportunities afforded them through their profession to support and empower pupils and seem to align themselves with an 'extended professional' conception of teacher professionalism (Sachs, 2003). However, they have also discussed the potential limits of education and the challenges encountered due to pressure placed on them to offer in depth support that extends well beyond their perceived understanding of education.

## List of abbreviations

EAL	English as an additional language
ITE	Initial Teacher Education
LGBT+	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender plus.
MSc	Master of Science
MPDP@SU	Making A Positive Difference Project at Stirling University
SAC	Scottish Attainment Challenge

## Introduction

The University of Stirling project, MPDP@SU, is focused on engagement with a cohort of teachers who are undertaking Master's level courses that explore critical understandings of equity (in relation to theory, policy and practice) and how these might translate into supporting mentee teachers and students, so as to promote broader changes within communities of practice. Research findings to date suggest that alignment with existing policy conceptions of equitable practice alone will not foster the shifts in understanding and practice that are required in order to effectively address differential attainment among pupils (Drew and Watson, 2014; l'Anson and Eady 2017).

The MSc programme in question, Professional Education and Leadership, offers the first year 'Promoting Equity: theory, principles and critique' module. Until now, those members of the first student cohort who chose to progress to the next stage of the programme were then able to enrol on the 'Promoting Equity: In Educational Practice' module. Going forward, however, future teacher-participants will instead join the 'Coaching and Mentoring: Principles and Practices' module, which will be developed to include further material related to equity in order to complement the first year course.

These two modules address core aspects of MPDP@SU: understandings of equity, its role in educational practice and the sustainability of shifts within communities of practice, through both the transmission of ideas and practices and the medium of mentoring. There have, to date, been two student cohorts, who undertook the first module in 2018/19 and 2019/20 respectively. The course has been well received and will, from the next academic session, be available at both the first- and second-year stages of the MSc in Professional Education and Leadership.

The current cohort are in the process of completing their first year course, which affords them opportunities to engage with a range of resources related to equity and education, reflecting on their experiences and on their pedagogical practices, discussing these issues in regular meetings guided by Dr Alison Jasper and Dr John l'Anson. The resources selected for the module are varied in nature and format, featuring a range of approaches – educational, literary, and sociological – to equity. Their inclusion in the module fosters the questioning of existing pedagogical traditions and educational frameworks and the challenging of assumptions, encouraging the students to connect the conceptions of equity raised with their own professional practice. The students have further opportunities to develop their own understandings of equity in the context of their practice through a series of assignments.

While the work with teacher-participants through the 'Promoting Equity: theory, principles and critique' module facilitates the development of conceptual understandings of equity, the challenging of assumptions and the reimagining of pedagogy, which are core aspects of MPDP@SU, relate to a further stage of the project that consists of empirical research. Dr McKelvey will interview those members of each cohort who agree to participate in order to gain an insight into their experiences of the course content, the influence it has had on their professional development and understandings of equity, and therefore its relevance to, and impacts on, their professional practice. This is important both in terms of ascertaining the role

of universities in supporting practitioners to develop more inclusive practices and obtaining feedback from teacher-participants so as to continue shaping the modules in question to be as useful as possible to practitioners.

Due to recent developments, these interviews will be carried out online; this will be discussed in more detail in the Methodology section. There may also be a second phase of empirical research, which is conditional on the ongoing situation related to COVID-19 because it involves in-person data collection and classroom observations carried out by the Research Assistant, Dr McKelvey.

If circumstances do later allow this stage of the project to be realised, it would be of great value, as it would allow for an exploration of how the students who have completed, or are completing, the 'Promoting Equity' courses at the University of Stirling implement their learning. The opportunity to consider the connection between conceptual understandings and the realities of practice, gaining an insight into communities of practice, would be beneficial to the project. The chance to observe and evaluate the ways in which teacher-participants may influence and inform their professional environment and their colleagues would also be particularly pertinent to the mentoring aspect of the research. Furthermore, this empirical research may facilitate the future development of the 'Promoting Equity' course design.

As the project has been developed, the value of producing a resource that will support current and future students on the 'Promoting Equity' pathway of the MSc in Professional Education and Leadership has become clear. Additionally, the project team have determined that raising awareness of the equity-related resources and learning provided by the two 'Promoting Equity' modules in question has the potential to contribute to the development of more equitable education policy and practice more widely, lessening the impact of inequity on student attainment. As such, the MPDP@SU team are currently working on a book proposal, provisionally titled *Promoting Equity*. The book aims to make the content discussed in the 'Promoting Equity: theory, principles and critique' module, as well as the approaches to equity that they illustrate, available to a broader audience of teachers, education professionals, school leadership and policymakers. There will be a strong focus on practice, with case studies and insights offered by the students participating in MPDP@SU included in order to provide support and inspiration to those who can potentially shape a more equitable Scottish education system.



## Research questions

1. What barriers to greater inclusivity do practitioners identify?
2. Which discursive resources are drawn upon in the framing of problematics and in proposals offered in response?
3. What work upon the self do these proposals imply?
4. How are these approaches translated into practice?
5. In what ways does the mentor encourage the new teacher to learn from their practice?
6. How, and to what extent, does the translation of (critical, educational, social, ecological, gender and equity-related) theory into practice inform this?
7. To what extent are such shifts in practice promoted more widely?
8. To what extent are more equitable practices sustainable?
9. How do practitioners evaluate equitable practices and proposals?

## Framing the question

MPDP@SU is focused on discursive approaches to equity and their translation into practice, particularly in the context of communities of practice. Previous research (Drew and Watson, 2014; I'Anson and Eady 2017) that mapped the support available to early career teachers during their induction process indicated that there were two significant challenges at play regarding the fostering of more equitable pedagogical practice. These challenges were identified as, firstly, the necessity of translation from theoretical understandings of relevant issues to their implementation in practice and, secondly, the transmission of these equitable concepts and values between and among practitioners, particularly with respect to early career teachers. In terms of addressing this second challenge, the role of mentoring for student and beginning teachers was highlighted.

In light of these findings, MPDP@SU, aims to support in-depth professional learning for teachers that fosters significant and sustainable change within the Scottish education system, facilitating the development and dissemination of more equitable practice and thereby addressing the Scottish Attainment Challenge (SAC) goals. The role of higher education in supporting teachers' professional learning was also highlighted by the aforementioned research (Drew and Watson, 2014; I'Anson and Eady 2017). This was particularly noted with regard to the impact universities can have in challenging established pedagogy and socialisation that do not recognise the nuances of both understanding and practice that are required in order to foster more inclusive educational practices. MPDP@SU thus aims to support greater equity in education by encouraging its teacher-participants to develop their theoretical knowledge and adopt innovative, inclusive approaches that address the equity issues raised through their master's studies. The insights gained through the research team's work with the current student cohort will be further developed in *Promoting Equity*, which will increase the project's impact by raising wider awareness of equity-related concepts and inclusive pedagogical approaches among practitioners and policymakers.

Working with practitioners to develop their conceptual understandings of equity, to facilitate their critical approaches to pedagogy and to foster the implementation of this learning in their pedagogical practice are core elements of the project. The role of the teacher-participants who are undertaking or who have undertaken the 'Promoting Equity' modules as part of their Masters studies is therefore central to the research being carried out at the University of Stirling: it is not only their participation in the course and the experiences and framings of equity that they share in the course meetings that are of great value to the project, but also their approach to practice in light of this learning and, crucially, the way in which such potential shifts in pedagogy may be sustainable.

This latter element brings into focus another significant element of MPDP@SU: teacher mentoring. As mentioned in the Introduction to this report, those students among the cohort who continue to their second year of the MSc programme have the opportunity to apply the knowledge and skills gained in relation to equity, to the subsequent course, which is focused on mentoring. (Previously the second course was the 'Promoting Equity: In Educational Practice' module but, from the 2020/2021 academic year, students will instead enrol on the 'Coaching

and Mentoring: Principles and Practices' module.) This focus on the mentoring of colleagues allows for capacity building among teacher-participants so as to support student and beginning teachers, thereby fostering more sustainable equitable practice. This is particularly important because one of the project's broader aims is to encourage shifts within communities of practice that allow student and early career teachers to learn more inclusive practices.

At each stage of the MSc programme, teacher-participants work collaboratively, sharing experiences and insights with one another and supporting each other's learning development. This collaborative practitioner enquiry is an important element of the project and, more widely, relational networks are considered to be important to many aspects of this project, both within the student cohorts as part of the learning and professional development during their Masters studies and between teacher-participants and the ITE and early career teachers that they later mentor. The support offered by mentoring during teacher training and probationary periods has been recognised as a key aspect of fostering pedagogical practice that is informed by theory, inclusive and open. The importance of wider relational networks, beyond mentoring, has however been highlighted by previous research (e.g., DeJong, 2016), which noted that the standard of mentoring experience by many student and beginning teachers does not promote the approaches required in order to establish more equitable practice that supports pupils who may face additional educational barriers.

One of the core elements of MPDP@SU is a focus upon the sustainability of shifts in communities of practice and upon the potential for impact on practice within ITE and for beginning teachers, within and outwith classrooms, through dissemination activities and the book project, which will communicate insights and findings that arise from this research

The project draws upon four areas of research literature that have been identified as significant: teacher socialisation, critical and productive pedagogies, teacher professional learning and ecological understandings of teacher agency and which collectively form a common conceptual frame of reference across partner institutions. This dovetails with the conceptual understandings that are promoted by shifting teachers' approaches and allows for a common language so that both mentors and mentees can work towards shared outcomes related to closing the attainment gap. The research team's findings will be shared with partner universities and will contribute to the development of Initial Teacher Education (ITE) and Professional Education programmes. The project team will also share its findings nationally and internationally, in peer-reviewed publications, at conferences and in the book, *Promoting Equity*, that is currently being developed.

## **Methodological approach**

### *Altered research design due to COVID19.*

As mentioned in the Introduction, the present circumstances have altered the Making a Positive Difference project design, due to the current impossibility of carrying out empirical research in person as a result of the restrictions imposed and the school closures due to COVID19.

Initially the research phase of the project was intended to involve face to face interviews with the teacher-participants, from both student cohorts, who have undertaken the 'Promoting Equity: theory, principles and critique' and, in the case of the first cohort, also the 'Promoting Equity: In Educational Practice' modules at the University of Stirling. The aim was to follow these interviews with classroom observations later in the year, in order to gain an insight into how the students' theoretical understandings of equity, as developed through the courses, were translated into practice and, regarding the first cohort, how this might translate into mentoring and the transmission of those understandings and practices within their professional communities.

This research design has necessarily been reimagined so that the planned interviews will now be carried out online using digital platforms, thus allowing the Research Assistant to speak with the research participants while holding to physical distancing rules. This use of online platforms for the research interviews will engage a number of additional methodological concerns and ethical issues, which will be addressed below.

The hoped-for classroom observations, on the other hand, have now been designated as Phase Two of the research project and postponed until a more appropriate time. If circumstances later allow for these to take place, or indeed for follow-up meetings with participants in person, a separate ethical approval application will have to be made for this second phase of data collection.

In light of the present situation and the ensuing adaptations to the project design, the research team has additionally decided, as already touched on, to produce a book as part of its research output, in order to maximise the impact of the project. This resource is currently in the planning stages and aims to not only support those teachers who enrolled on the module, but also to facilitate greater awareness among both practitioners and policymakers of the issues addressed by the equity-related MSc in Professional Education and Leadership courses. The book project will be discussed in more detail below.

### *The role of the 'Promoting Equity: theory, principles and critique' module.*

As noted previously, the 'Promoting Equity: theory, principles and critique' module is a centrepiece of MPDP@SU. As part of the MSc in Professional Education and Leadership programme, the module has raised issues connected to pedagogy and inclusion, supporting students to consider their own experiences in the classroom and their own teaching practices in relation to equity. The module guides students through conceptualisations of education and of

equity, encouraging them to critically consider established practices and socialised patterns in teaching, to relate these issues to their own professional experiences and to imagine otherwise, in order to support them in developing more inclusive practices. The course additionally engages a wide range of resources in order to illustrate the aforementioned issues, to highlight relevant theoretical frameworks and to raise questions about how education professionals can create more equitable learning environments. These resources include academic writing, poetry, recorded interviews, podcasts and videos. Feedback received from the current student cohort suggests that the varied nature of the materials used by teaching staff were appreciated and were considered helpful in supporting the students' learning.

The project's Research Assistant, Dr Róisín McKelvey, has attended a number of the module's 2019/20 seminars (the latter two of which were conducted online due to the current circumstances related to COVID19) in order to observe the discussions that unfolded within them. The notes recorded during these meetings, in addition to completed assignments submitted by students from both the 2018/19 and 2019/20 cohorts, form part of the data to be analysed in MPDP@SU. These sources of data will additionally be used, with the students' consent, in the development of the project's book, *Promoting Equity*, while the 2019/20 students will form a reference group for this aspect of the project, contributing their insights and experiences more directly.

#### *The shift to online interviews – additional considerations.*

The shift to online interviews has implications for the research findings and ethical considerations that must of course be considered. Aside from the potential for technical issues related to internet connection, audio and visual settings etc., it should be acknowledged that interactions that take place online are mediated through a different space than those carried out in person and that the interactions may be shaped differently as a result. The potential for more stilted communication or for participants being less comfortable is hopefully offset in the case of the 2019/20 student cohort because Dr McKelvey, who will be conducting the interviews, has established a rapport with them by attending a number of the seminars scheduled as part of the 'Promoting Equity: theory, principles and critique' module. This is not the case, however, with regard to the previous cohort, who completed the course in 2018/19. It will be necessary to take this into account when carrying out online interviews with these students and to be aware of the potentially different dynamic in an online interview.

Although certain aspects of the methodology have been altered, others remain unchanged. The ethical requirements applied to in-person interviews will of course be respected. Participants will still receive Participant Information Sheets and will be asked to read and sign consent forms: in line with the methodological shifts already outlined, these will be returned to the interviewer via email. Unless the participants wish to be credited, their responses will be anonymised, as will any identifiable details such as the school at which they are employed. The interviews will be recorded only with the participants' consent and an additional necessity resulting from the use of online platforms is that the Research Assistant must be careful to use one that does not store meeting recordings on its own server.

The interviews will be semi-structured in nature, in order to allow some scope for comparison when analysing the research findings, while also providing opportunities for the participants to offer their own insights and share their experiences.

There are key aspects of the teacher-participants' experiences of professional learning regarding equity that the research team hope to explore through the interview process. The "skeleton structure" (Tomlinson, 1989: 167), designed to address the project team's core research questions and from which the interview schedule was developed, can be found below. This will be used to measure which topics are addressed spontaneously by the participants, as a result of the space afforded them by the semi-structured interview approach, and also to guide the interviewer in raising any issues that are not covered spontaneously, according to the top-down interview schedule that will be included in the following section of this report.

Skeleton structure:

- Students' experiences:
  - of equity issues encountered through their work
  - of the 'Promoting Equity' module(s)
- Students' conceptual understandings of equity and the impact of the 'Promoting Equity' course(s) on these
- Imaginative projection of potential equitable practices and projects:
  - Respondents' views on instituting change and which measures they might adopt
- Potential barriers or challenges that they anticipate
- The sustainability of shifts in practice
  - Which measures might be taken to change cultures in a lasting way?
  - The prospect of mentoring student and beginning teachers

## Analytical approach

This research will utilise at least three sources of data:

- online semi-structured interviews with teacher-participants
- a reflective assignment submitted by teacher-participants
- an assignment produced by teacher-participants, either in poster or presentation form, with accompanying written work

As mentioned previously, there may be an additional, second stage of empirical data collection later in the year (subject to further ethical approval). If this were to go ahead, it would be in the form of in-person follow-up interviews and classroom observations.

In any case, each of these three initial groups of data sources will be analysed individually before being considered collectively.

The semi-structured interview format was chosen because the research team aim to study the data sources comparatively in order to draw conclusions about the impact of the 'Promoting Equity' courses and of the professional learning they offer, yet also to provide the participants with space to offer their own insights and experiences. It should of course be acknowledged that, through the use of semi-structured interviews, there is an interactional element to this particular aspect of the data collection and the researcher (Dr McKelvey) will arguably play a role in co-constructing or co-participating in the interview process. Even with a semi-structured format, the selection of questions included in the interview schedule will direct, to a certain extent, the course of the discussion. In addition, the way in which the Research Assistant expresses herself during the interaction may influence the participant's responses.

Criticisms have been levelled against the use of interviews in data collection on such grounds: "The basic argument against interviews as a method of data collection is that they produce "unnatural" data since the interviewer influences their production (through questions, interruptions, silences, etc.)" (De Fina and Perrino, 2011: 5). Nevertheless, it has been deemed important by the project team to gain an insight into the experiences of the teacher-participants – both in terms of the theoretical course content and the realities of practice – and to offer individual space to each participant. In evaluating the University of Stirling modules in question, it is also useful to have some basis for comparison across participant responses, which is why some degree of similarity in the interview schedules is required. A semi-structured rather than structured approach was chosen, however, in order to minimise the impact of the researcher on the interview responses and subsequent findings: while allowing the researcher to obtain necessary information, a semi-structured approach gives space to the participants to offer their own insights and to shape the discussion. While interviews do not take place in a vacuum and therefore the interviewer has an impact on the interaction, adopting an approach which is less rigidly designed by the interviewer and which makes more space for the participant's input helps to reduce this impact as far as possible. In this connection, the approach of 'Hierarchical Focusing' developed by Tomlinson (1989) (see below), hands over the direction of the interview to the respondent, so that the researcher is not structuring proceedings, but following the conversation as this unfolds.

Given that the teacher-participants' understanding of equity issues and their place in practice are significant aspects of this research project, the interview-data-as-topic approach (De Fina and Perrino, 2011) will be adopted when drawing on the data collected during the interviews. The responses of the participants will thus be considered to illustrate a reality that has been co-constructed with the interviewer and influenced by the interactional elements at play between the participants and the interviewer (De Fina and Perrino, 2011). As a result, interview responses will be discussed in relation to the roles of the interview schedule and the presence of the researcher, rather than viewing them as representative either of how the participants might respond in other contexts (Block, 2000) or of an objective reality that remains uninfluenced by the interview context (De Fina and Perrino, 2011).

Similarly, the nature of this particular project, interested as the project team is in the learning and the practices of the teacher-participants, the interview data collected will be analysed using a symptomatic rather than a veridical approach (Kvale, 1996; Block, 2000). As such, rather than being perceived as objective, accurate records recounted to the researcher, the students' interview responses will be considered to be "representational" of their realities, as "presentational" of the participants, influenced as they are by their experiences and the context of the interview and the research topic (Block, 2000: 758). This will allow the project team to draw upon the perceptions and experiences of teacher-participants regarding their professional learning on the 'Promoting Equity' courses, any 'imagining otherwise' that may be inspired by it and their implementation of that learning, including any challenges they may encounter in doing so: the understandings and experiences of the students are central to this research.

The interview schedule has been developed, as far as possible, according to 'top down' hierarchical focusing (Tomlinson, 1989) and is as follows:

1. Do you have any initial thoughts you'd like to share about your experience with the course, equity or your teaching practice?
2. Can you give me some background on what led you to enrol on the programme?
3. How have you found the course? Has it been helpful for you, professionally and/or personally?
  - a. Is there anything additional you would have found useful?
  - b. Is there anything you think could be improved in the course programme?
4. Can you describe your understanding of equity, following your learning on the course?
5. Have you found the insights of the other teachers on the programme useful?
6. Has anything you have learnt on the course surprised you?
7. How have the resources and discussions about equity influenced you?
  - a. Either in the way you conceptualise or develop your teaching practice?
8. Have you come across any challenges, either in the course discussions about equity, or in trying to implement what you have learnt on the course?
9. Have you implemented any new practices/altered your existing practice as a result of the course?
  - a. If so, would you characterise those practices as successful? Were there any unexpected outcomes or challenges?



- b. If not, are there any practices you are considering adopting?
        - i. Or any changes to your teaching practices that you are considering?
- 10. Have there been any opportunities to discuss your experiences and the ways in which your practice may have been influenced with colleagues who have not taken the course?
  - a. If so, what reception did this receive?
  - b. If not, is this something you intend to do?
- 11. Do you feel that the culture and ethos of your school foregrounds and supports equitable practice?
  - a. If not, what might improve this?
  - b. Do you have any project or support ideas that might encourage more equitable approaches?
- 12. What are your thoughts on mentoring student and beginning teachers?
  - a. Do you feel that the programme is preparing you well for this (or that the material to come is likely to do so)?
  - b. What learning are you likely to pass on to student and beginning teachers that you do mentor?
  - c. How might you encourage them to implement such learning?

## Analysis

Due to the delays and disruption caused by the situation with COVID19, the project team has so far been unable to gather its empirical research. We have, however, been able to meet with some of the prospective participants online for their remaining seminars on the 'Promoting Equity: theory, principles and critique' module, from which some initial observations can be drawn. The Research Assistant, Dr McKelvey, hopes to carry out the online interviews discussed above in the near future. The current student cohort is in the process of completing assessed work and once this has been submitted, their assignments will be an additional data source available to Dr McKelvey.

At this point, the only initial conclusions we can draw are in relation to the aforementioned online seminars. The teacher-participants have engaged enthusiastically with the course material and the equity related issues it raises, showing a great deal of interest and a propensity for translating theoretical concepts into the realities of their professional experience. This in particular is something that has been noted by the project team and will be addressed in the book we are developing, because illuminating that process and the relevance of these issues to pedagogical practice could be very useful to other education professionals.

The 2019/20 student cohort has shown great skill in working collaboratively to grasp conceptual frameworks and to apply them to practice, discussing the resources used on the course with interest and with growing confidence in approaching them critically. The purpose of education and the role of educators has tended to be viewed in a relatively holistic way, with a common perception that teachers bear responsibility for more than the academic attainment of their pupils. A "duty of care" was referenced and overall there was a shared belief that addressing inequity among pupils, as far as possible, is an important aspect of teachers' work. To this extent, all teachers within this cohort were aligned with an 'extended professional' conception of teacher professionalism (Sachs, 2003); significant issues are raised by the potentially unlimited nature of this responsibility, the possible translation of (e.g. structural poverty) issues into pedagogical issues, and the bearing this has on 'education' both as a concept and its disciplinary scope.

The group consists entirely of primary school teachers, though they teach a variety of ages within that age range and thus bring diverse insights and approaches. There has, for instance, been interesting discussion of the role of creativity and play in teaching and learning and of the relevance of equity – including imagining otherwise through the use of play and creative activities. The significance of play to equity was summarised thus: "play offers children a safe space to explore and develop. It also allows teachers to engage with children, to observe them, to understand their needs and backgrounds and try to empower them." The concept of play as a safe space for children was repeatedly highlighted.

The group agreed that the value of play at all stages of education, including secondary education, should be recognised, as it offers pupils space for self-development and allows teachers to support this and to "promote self-differentiated learning". Its value was also raised in relation to barriers that may create inequity, for instance by reducing language barriers for and facilitating the engagement of EAL pupils. The concept of "scaffolding" (Foley, 1994) was

applied in students' discussions of the importance of giving space to play and they noted that scaffolding is not simply the purview of teachers and can also be done by classmates supporting and learning from one another.<sup>2</sup>

With regard to the sustainability of change and to mentoring, the importance of sharing learning regarding equity with more established colleagues, rather than only or primarily with student or beginning teachers, was raised during discussions. Additionally, the students highlighted the necessity of encouraging pupils themselves to challenge assumptions and imagine otherwise, for themselves and for society. It was commented on by students that the resources they had been exposed to on the 'Promoting Equity: theory, principles and critique' module had highlighted the impact that teachers can have on empowering pupils to imagine otherwise, to bring together the three aspects of agency (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998; Biesta and Tedder, 2006) and encourage shifts in thinking. Two examples offered of ways this could be implemented were encouraging support and inclusion for LGBT+ pupils and empowering pupils to make changes, both in attitude and in action, regarding climate change.<sup>3</sup>

In relation to current affairs and issues related to social justice, the students agreed that it is necessary, even advisable, to move away from the curriculum if needed in order to address important issues with pupils and to respectfully question or challenge discriminatory beliefs where they are encountered in the classroom. The students commented on the importance of Initial Teacher Education (ITE) and support in doing this, arguing that anxiety related to the reactions of pupils' families can be an obstacle and that the absence of resources and training was one factor in disparities between legislation/policy and practice regarding education on equality and diversity issues. It was additionally noted that allowing pupils to participate in guiding discussion and learning in the classroom is part of the Curriculum of Excellence and should be encouraged.

#### *The impact of COVID19.*

The current circumstances have, of course, affected not only the project design but also the students' professional realities. School closures have resulted in a shift to online learning, which raises its own equity considerations, and in a reduction in contact that has led to pupil welfare concerns among teachers. The project team invited discussion among the cohort of their teaching experiences during lockdown, during which a range of access and equity issues were mentioned, including but not limited to:

- Technical issues affecting communication and the participation of pupils;
- Lack of access to required digital platforms or devices;
- Challenges faced by teachers in accessing resources, such as providing complete texts;
- Varied and inconsistent rates of pupil engagement;
- The over-involvement of pupils' families
  - Interrupting pupils' participation
  - Teachers' uncertainty as to whether pupils are completing their own work;

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<sup>2</sup> This is one example of the cohort's propensity for translating from theory to practice.

<sup>3</sup> A further example of the application of theory to professional practice.

- The risk of instances of cyber-bullying

The cohort also reported that, due to regulations put in place to restrict individual communication with pupils, the shift to online teaching has made it difficult to provide personalised teaching or to offer the additional support needed by some members of the class. It was noted that pupils learn in different ways and that teachers are even less able to accommodate this in the present situation due to relying on online communication and teaching.

There were also concerns expressed about the toll of the abrupt transition on pupils and the way this may pose challenges at the start of the next academic year, particularly in primary schools, as pupils find themselves in new classes and with new teachers. The students recommended that a transition period would be beneficial in order to support re-socialisation and re-assert classroom learning and routines. They also raised concerns about the logistical and sanitary issues, if health-related restrictions are put in place, involved in the return to usual classroom teaching, in addition to staffing issues and engagement issues, due to the prolonged disruption of routine and absence from the classroom.

It should also be noted, however, that the students did highlight a number of positive aspects of the current focus on online learning, which was stated to:

- allow some pupils to blossom in a way that the classroom setting does not;
  - potentially be empowering and confidence boosting for those pupils who are comfortable with technology – potentially more so than other kinds of work;
- allow pupils to be much more independent in their learning;
- allow pupils to have agency about when and how they complete their work;
- allow space for peer feedback;

It was suggested that online platforms for learning could potentially continue to be utilised once pupils return to the classroom and could help to encourage parental engagement and inter-generational learning in education and thus greater support for pupils at home: another example of the teacher-participants imagining otherwise.

## Conclusion

Due to the unfortunate delay to empirical data collection, the research design and timeline for MPDP@SU have been altered in the aforementioned ways. The project team has nevertheless found that working with the current student cohort has allowed initial findings to arise and has additionally developed the project to include the publication of a book that will be a useful resource for practitioners and policymakers, thereby furthering the project's impact and the sustainability of its research outcomes.

The experiences reported by the teachers currently participating in the 'Promoting Equity: theory, principles and critique' module, in addition to their feedback, suggest that the professional learning provided by the course is both necessary and of value.

Early observations derived from discussions that have taken place among the 2019/20 student cohort suggest that there is indeed significant awareness of equity issues among early career teachers in Scotland, as well as a willingness to further this understanding in order to address these issues as they arise in the classroom and to develop more (sustainable) inclusive practices. The students in question have displayed the ability to apply their conceptual learning to their professional practice and to recognise potential links between their respective experiences and insights, drawing connections that allow them to collectively and individually imagine otherwise for their future practice.

The ways in which COVID19 and the related restrictions have altered their current teaching practice have prompted awareness of additional equity and welfare issues that may otherwise not have been highlighted by their usual professional environments. It is possible that the necessary shift into a perhaps previously unimagined kind of pedagogical practice has encouraged the students to more openly envisage ways in which their practice can be shaped by their equity-related learning during their master's studies. Ideas for change that might previously have been regarded as inconceivable or impossible can now be entertained (Latour, 2020).

## Taking ideas forward

The central output from the Making a Positive Difference project will be the publication of the book, *Promoting Equity*, which is currently being developed by the research team. Given the potential impact of this project on inclusive teaching practices, it is considered important to support the transmission of knowledge pertaining not only to the conceptual learning offered by the equity-related modules included in the MSc in Professional Education and Leadership programme, but also to the application of this learning to pedagogical practice, within communities of practice. As such, the project team will produce a book that will encourage wider awareness of the issues addressed through the modules in question.

*Promoting Equity* will discuss equity in the context of education, drawing on the wide range of resources utilised in the University of Stirling's 'Promoting Equity: theory, principles and critique' module. The text is designed to supplement the aforementioned course, broadly following its outline, highlighting the conceptual approaches to equity that are explored by students and the way in which those relate to their professional practice, with a view to developing more equitable practices and, if they continue to the connected second year course, to supporting student and newly qualified teachers in doing the same. The authors' intention is that the book will also be of interest and of use to teachers who have not enrolled on the course in question, to education professionals and to policymakers.

It should be noted that, in order to ensure that it is as useful and as widely relevant a text as possible, one key aspect of the book will be its grounding in practice and in the experiences of teachers. As such, *Promoting Equity* will draw on the insights of the teacher-participants with whom the project team have been working, highlighting their illustrations of equity-related challenges encountered in their professional practice, their understandings of the theoretical approaches they have explored due to their learning on the MSc programme and their plans for imagining otherwise in the future. The students have responded positively to both the book project itself and to the opportunity to contribute to its development by sharing their experiences. All content that draws on the participation of teacher-participants is of course subject to the established ethical considerations.

The insights offered by the teacher-participants will additionally relate to the 'Promoting Equity' module content itself, allowing the project team to note any potential areas for future improvement so as to shape the courses in the ways that are most useful in supporting teachers to develop their professional learning and practice with regard to equity.

The project team envisage this text as a resource that will support teachers, beyond those teacher-participants who have been involved in the 'Promoting Equity' modules, as well as policymakers, to challenge existing assumptions and pedagogical frameworks, to imagine otherwise in a way that allows them to develop more inclusive policies and practices and to build these into their communities of practice, thus fostering sustainable changes that promote a more equitable education system.

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## Acknowledgements

### Chapter One: Introduction

Authors' names: Dr Róisín McKelvey, Dr Alison Jasper and Dr John I'Anson.

### Chapter Two: Conceptualising equity

Authors' names: Dr Róisín McKelvey, Dr Alison Jasper and Dr John I'Anson.

### Chapter Three: Equity in education: the role of educators

Authors' names: Dr Róisín McKelvey, Dr Alison Jasper and Dr John I'Anson.

### Chapter Four: The construction of equity: discursive and theoretical approaches to (in)equity

Authors' names: Dr Róisín McKelvey, Dr Alison Jasper and Dr John I'Anson.

### Chapter Five: Challenging assumptions and imagining otherwise

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### Chapter Six: Equity in practice: teachers' toolkits and empowering pupils

Authors' names: Dr Róisín McKelvey, Dr Alison Jasper and Dr John I'Anson.

### Chapter Seven: Translating equity: language diversity in the classroom

Author name: Dr Róisín McKelvey.

### Chapter Eight: Mentoring: translating learning into wider pedagogical practice.

Author name: Dr Róisín McKelvey, Dr Alison Jasper and Dr John I'Anson.

### Chapter Nine: Conclusion

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