

In conversation with HMCI Sir Martyn Oliver: Ofsted and equity

Weds 22nd April, University of Exeter

Summary

A recent conversation with HMCI Sir Martyn Oliver explored how equity, rather than equality, should shape education and inspection. The discussion highlighted a shift towards recognising disadvantage as complex and dynamic, while maintaining high expectations for all pupils. However, significant tensions remain around how achievement is measured, how inclusion is resourced, and how accountability frameworks balance fairness with rigour. Ultimately, delivering true equity will require alignment between inspection, funding, and wider policy not just changes in rhetoric or framework design.

Equity in Education: Moving Beyond the Rhetoric

I recently attended *"In conversation with HMCI Sir Martyn Oliver: Ofsted and equity"*, a thought provoking discussion that raised a fundamental question for our education system:

Are we truly designing for equity or still operating within the limits of equality?

At the heart of the conversation was a clear message: equity must go beyond labels, assumptions, and simple frameworks. It is not just about identifying disadvantage through proxies such as free school meals or SEND status. Instead, it requires a more nuanced understanding of need one that recognises vulnerability as fluid, contextual, and, at times, temporary.

A powerful idea that resonated throughout:

If we get it right for the most underserved children, we get it right for everyone.

Rethinking Disadvantage

Sir Martyn Oliver challenged the sector to move beyond narrow definitions of disadvantage. Vulnerability is not fixed; it can emerge at any point in a child's life through bereavement, illness, or changing personal circumstances.

This shift in thinking has significant implications. It calls for systems that are responsive rather than rigid, and for schools to be empowered to recognise and respond to need in real time.

The Tensions at the Centre of the System

While the ambition for equity is widely shared, the discussion surfaced a number of persistent tensions that continue to shape practice:

High Expectations vs Context

There was strong agreement that expectations for pupils should not be lowered due to circumstance. However, this must sit alongside a deep understanding of the contexts in which schools operate particularly in areas facing significant social and economic challenges.

Achievement vs Starting Points

A key question remains: what counts as success?

For some schools especially special schools achievement may look very different from national benchmarks. Progress might mean developing communication skills, independence, or emotional regulation.

This raises an important challenge for inspection: how do we ensure frameworks recognise meaningful, life changing progress while maintaining national standards?

Inclusion vs Funding Reality

Inclusive practice often demands more more staffing, more expertise, more resource. Yet funding structures do not always reflect this reality.

The result is a growing disconnect between the system's ambition for equity and the financial structures that underpin it particularly in areas with historically lower funding levels.

Accountability vs Development

There are signs of change in Ofsted's approach, including a move away from single headline grades towards more nuanced report cards. This reflects a broader attempt to capture the complexity of school performance.

However, inspection remains high stakes. Striking the right balance between accountability and developmental support continues to be a critical and unresolved challenge.

A Shift in Inspection Thinking

Ofsted's evolving framework signals an intention to better reflect complexity. Inclusion is no longer treated as a standalone category but is expected to be embedded across all areas curriculum, leadership, teaching, and outcomes.

There is also a growing emphasis on avoiding simplistic judgements and recognising the varied contexts in which schools operate. At the same time, maintaining credibility and consistency across inspections remains essential.

The Challenge of Measuring Success

One of the most complex issues raised was how to measure achievement fairly across diverse contexts.

With the removal of some established progress measures, there is increasing difficulty in comparing schools and recognising those making significant gains in challenging circumstances. Suggestions such as contextual comparisons or similar schools models highlight a desire for more sophisticated tools but also underline how difficult this problem is to solve.

The central tension persists:

How do we acknowledge context without allowing it to excuse low outcomes?

Equity in Practice

From a practitioner perspective, the message is clear:

Equity is not an abstract principle it is lived daily through decisions, trade offs, and priorities in schools.

Leaders and teachers are already navigating these complexities balancing high expectations with the realities of their communities, striving for inclusion while managing limited resources, and working within an accountability system that is still evolving.

The Bigger Picture

Perhaps the most important takeaway is that achieving true equity requires more than changes to inspection frameworks.

It demands alignment across policy, funding, and accountability systems.

Without this alignment, there is a risk that equity remains an aspiration rather than a reality.

Final Reflection

Ultimately, the success of the education system should be judged by how well it serves those who need it most.

Equity is not just about intention it is about whether every child, regardless of their starting point, has a genuine opportunity to succeed.

The question now is not whether we agree with this principle but how consistently and effectively it is realised in practice.

Emma Kerr, 23.4.26