Education is one of the most unfair areas of British civic life. In Newcastle, schools have improved performance at a higher rate than nationally, but wide income disparities and high levels of poverty mean that there is still a wide attainment gap between children from families living in different economic circumstances. However, injustice also exists in school choice, in how resources are allocated - which implies a consideration of how different needs are defined, and in participation in both decision-making and in active, engaging learning. Education can help address the effects of social and economic inequalities and yet, without a sufficiently rigorous social justice framework within which to balance competing demands, many educational practices currently exacerbate unfairness. There is a profound problem for social justice in a system which is purportedly meritocratic, but which consistently rewards the most privileged in society.

The paper draws on data collected of current perspectives on fairness. Data is collected via an interdisciplinary sandpit event with a variety of stakeholders including academics, educational professionals and public sector and voluntary. Focus groups in four schools provides data on how young people construct understandings of fairness.

The paper focuses on the complexity of the task of making education fairer, outlining recent policy decisions in terms of the different perspectives on social justice which are brought to bear on educational problems and drawing on themes from data. The paper concludes by arguing that educational unfairness and inequality is a problem for all of society and must be tackled as such. Theoretically, an approach which incorporates a model of stakes fairness into the over-arching considerations of procedural fairness and background fairness is recommended as a way of encouraging debate about whether it is fair for society to place such a premium on specific educational outcomes, or conversely such a penalty on those who do not achieve them. Practically, a participative dialogic fairness audit process for educational organisations is recommended as a way to marshal these complex issues and engender critical dialogue.