

# Equality Street

By Andy Midwinter

## Part 1: Considering the meaning of equality

### **Is it fair to eat a bacon sandwich?**

Jon stretched out a hand, groping for the source of the irritating alarm. If only he could find the snooze button he would be able to enjoy an extra nine whole minutes in bed. His frustrating search was interrupted and rendered pointless when his mum entered his bedroom and offered her usual ultimatum; “If you don’t get out of bed right now you will not have time for breakfast and your father will have to eat your bacon sandwiches.” Although his dad had never eaten his sandwiches he did not trust him enough to resist the temptation. He knew that when it came to eating, his father had what his grandmother called ‘a healthy appetite’, which Jon knew meant only one thing: he was an “eating machine”.

As he staggered down stairs, trying to do his tie up, he noticed that his magazine had arrived and was lying on the floor beneath the letterbox. As he looked, trying to see its cover, he thought of his visit to the local newsagent to apply for a newspaper round. He thought it was so unfair when he had been told that he was too young. It still made him feel so annoyed, but there was nothing he could do about it. The reaction of his parents had not helped, when they had said that they agreed with the law and would not have let him do it anyway.

He made himself stop thinking about it and took a close look at the cover of his tennis magazine. He noticed that there was a “free gift” sellotaped to the front cover. He thought what a strange idea that was- “free....gift”, how could a ‘gift’ be anything other than ‘free’? After all, if you have to pay for a gift it, it is not a gift! His father had told him this was called a tautology, when he was telling him about who he had called ‘the two twins’ he had met at his new secondary school. His dad had laughed and said, “How many? Well, you can’t have three twins! If they are twins it means there are only two of them- that’s what it means!” Well his dad thought it was funny! It is strange how we often use words we don’t need, he thought. He also wondered how often people thought about the meaning of the words they used.

### **Why not me?**

As he entered the kitchen he heard his dad talking to his mum about his friend at work. His father’s friend had told him that he was moving his son to another football club, because he was fed up that his son and some other boys were not being picked for the team, when another boy, who could hardly kick a ball was picked for every game. “Well,” said his mother, “I think everyone should be given a chance. Just because that boy is no good doesn’t mean he shouldn’t be picked... After all, if he is not picked how is he going to get any better?” She added with an air of satisfaction.

Where are the examples in this section of the story when

“I think you’re missing the point,” said his father, “my friend is not annoyed that the boy is being picked. He would be the first one to say that everyone should be given a chance. The problem is that this boy hardly ever turns up to training, but always ends up in the team. Other boys who attend training regularly and are better footballers never even get a game.”

“Well there must be some reason why he gets picked.” said his mother.

“There is,” replied his father, with a smile on his face, “he is the manager’s son.”

“Well that’s not fair,” his mother exclaimed, “everyone should be treated equally.”

Jon saw his chance to have a dig, “You wouldn’t let me take on the paper round, THAT’S not treating everyone equally, but you allowed Martin (Jon’s older brother) to have a paper round.”

“Not that one again,” said his mother in exasperation.

His father agreed, “Martin was two years older than you when he started a paper round. If you think these instances are the same then I am afraid that you do not know the meaning of the word ‘equality’”.

### **Who goes first?**

Jon went to school still feeling aggrieved about his parent’s refusal to see things his way. During registration his tutor announced that netball practice was taking place after school for anyone interested in playing for the school team. Jon did not say anything but he always wanted to play netball. He smiled to himself, wondering what the teacher would say if he turned up to the practice; after all, the announcement did say the practice was for *anyone* who wanted to play. Then he thought of the ridicule he would get from the other boys if he did turn up and his smile went.

At break he met up with his three close friends from primary school.

Pete and Anna were already waiting outside the canteen. Anna was with Sarah from her tutor group. Sarah had cerebral palsy and was in a wheel chair. Sarah had explained to the group that she had been born premature and had a lack of oxygen at birth which had caused her disability. But to the group she was simply ‘Sarah’, a really good friend and if they were honest didn’t even think about her being disabled.

However, she did need help with some things; for example, because the canteen was up a couple of steps she could not get into the canteen and relied on Anna to buy her some food. Sarah gave Anna her order as normal and the group made their way to the canteen assuring her they would not be long. They had managed to get into the queue quite near the front and would soon be served. Just as they were near the tills a large group of year 11’s pushed into the queue. “Hey!” protested Pete without thinking.

“Shut it squirt!” a boy, twice the size of Pete, retorted, “we’ve got to get to the tennis courts before you lot take ‘em all. Got a problem with that?” He added menacingly.

Pete backed off like a tortoise at the first sign of trouble.

But Jon was having none of it. He made his way to the dinner lady and told her what had happened. “Yes,” she said, in an unsympathetic tone, “It’s because you’re bottom of the food chain.”

“What do you mean?” questioned Jon.

“Well, when you are in year 11, you can jump the queue. It’s a privilege that comes with being in year 11” Came the reply, “Now get in line.”

Jon, shoulder’s hunched in resignation, moved back to the line. ‘That’s not to do with privileges,’ he thought, ‘it is simply unfair.’

“You know why she lets them push in,” said Anna, “That big kid, Gordon Williams, is her son.”

“YEAR ELEVEN!” came a booming voice. “Get to the back of the queue...NOW!” The voice was that of Mrs Saunders, Jon’s maths teacher. The year 11 knew better than to question any instruction given by her and moved swiftly to the back of the queue, heads lowered.

As they moved back, the dinner lady stood looking very uncomfortable. The dinner lady knew very well that some children *were* given special passes by teachers to join the front of the queue - those who had to attend revision lessons, or had a practice, but not so that they could claim a tennis court!

## **Part 2: Is equality treating everyone the same?**

### **When does an equal not equal an equal?**

Next lesson was maths. Jon did not like maths. Well, that's not entirely true, maths did not like him. He had to work really hard to stay in this group. It was not helped by his teacher, Mrs Saunders, who had a strange habit of giving everyone in the class the same amount of time. She would announce at the start of the lesson, "You all have to be treated fairly. We have no favourites in this class." She would then go around and give each pupil the same time- three minutes, regardless of whether they needed her help.

Today was no exception. She introduced the topic, differentiation, and proceeded to move around the classroom. With some pupils she simply crouched down and watched them complete the sums, adding the odd 'well done' and 'that's it' as words of encouragement. After she had stayed their allotted time she would move on to the next pupil. She eventually got her way round to Pete and Jon. Pete was already on question 12, while Jon was still on question 3. The first one he could do in his head and the second question he had to guess at. When it came to question 3 he knew he was having problems. As she sat next to Pete, for whom maths was his first language, she gave the customary, 'well done' and 'that's excellent'. Pete was on fire. He needed no help. For him Mrs Saunders was simply a spectator, but Pete didn't mind playing to the crowd.

Jon simply sat there, the mass of numbers staring meaninglessly back at him. He knew he had to do something with the numbers but could not remember what or, more importantly, why. At last Mrs Saunders was there. "Now Jon, how are you getting on." She said. When she saw what number he was on she exclaimed, "What, only question 3...and you got question 2 wrong." Jon felt himself redden. "The first 2 questions were give-aways to get you into the swing." She said uncharitably and making his embarrassment worse. He heard a few sniggers from other pupils in the room. "Let me go over it with you *again*," she said and proceeded to repeat her earlier introduction. This had failed to make sense first time and was no better second time around. "Right, got it?" She said firmly.

"Well actually, I am afraid I still do not understand Mrs Saunders." Jon said bravely.

"Sorry Jon, as I've told you before, there are no favourites in this class- you all have the same amount of my time. You will have to work on it on your own," she said as she brushed past him to stand and observe the pupil on the next desk who, like Pete, was racing ahead and needed no help.

### **Is it only hard if you don't know the answer?**

Jon could not wait for the end of the lesson, although his heart sank when Mrs Saunders told the class that their homework was to complete the questions and get ready for a test on differentiation in *tomorrow's* lesson. Jon felt totally useless as he walked out of the room.

Pete was ecstatic. "God that was easy," he said, thoughtlessly, "and I don't have any homework to do- I finished it all in the lesson."

"Great," said Jon gloomily, "I've still got to do all 15 questions. What's more I don't understand them. It's going to take me hours. I can't even do them on the calculator- she'll be checking the working out."

"But they're easy," said Pete, "what is there to not understand?"

"They are only easy if you know how to do them," replied Jon, "I don't see why she couldn't have explained it to me again."

"Yes, but if she gave more time to you she would not have had time to get around the rest of the class. I like that...the way she treats us all the same. That's what I call equality!" said Pete. After some time Pete said, "I can't even come around and give you a hand. I have got to go to football practice tonight. Looks like you're going to be burning the midnight oil."

After dinner the group all had English together and they made their way to the room. Ms Simms told the class that she wanted to look at some newspaper articles about different styles of writing. The first was a true story about a girl who lived in the small Wiltshire town of Chippenham. The girl had joined the boys to play rugby at the local club, and had been picked for the team. Unfortunately the Rugby Union had heard of this and threatened to expel the whole club from the league, if they allowed her to play again. Anna was outraged. "Why shouldn't she be able to play if she wants to? Just because she is a girl is no reason to stop her from playing!"

### **Where do you find the answers?**

Next lesson was RE and things picked up here as his teacher, Mr Goman was impressed with the amount of research he had done and gave him a merit. He also had the chance to explain to the class how strongly he felt about the treatment of the black people of South Africa. "What was wrong with how they treated?" quizzed Mr Goman.

"It was wrong, because people should be treated as equals," announced Jon.

"Yes, but what do you mean?" probed his teacher.

"Everyone should be allowed to do whatever they want and not be stopped because they are black...or because of their age." he added as an after-thought. "Everyone should be treated the same, they should be able to do what they want. Just because you're black, shouldn't stop you from getting a job...or mean that you can only live in certain areas."

"So you think everyone should be treated equally?" said Mr Goman.

"Yes of course." Replied Jon, a little confused as to why anyone would even ask the question.

"Think about it Jon, you believe that everyone should be treated exactly the same?"

Jon could not see what the problem was. He could not quite bring himself to believe that Mr Goman did not believe this, so why did he ask him to think about it so much?

Jon nodded his head.

"OK," said Mr Goman, "imagine there is an aeroplane crash, but the medic only has one syringe of morphine that can be used to kill the pain. There are several people who have injuries, but mostly scratches. One man though is seriously injured. He has a serious wound on his leg and is in a great deal of pain. The medic tells the man that he would like to give him all the morphine to kill the pain, but he has to treat everyone the equally. He therefore has to give everyone the same amount of morphine- even though for some the pain is not very great."

Anna had her hand up and Mr Goman asked her for her views.

"I know what you mean," said Anna, "it would be like a doctor seeing everyone in his practice- whether they were ill or not. If he did that everyone would only get a small amount of time, when the really sick patients would need much more of his time. Although everyone would get an equal amount of time, it is not what I call equality. Equality is not about *treating* people the same, but *considering* them all the same. If you're sick your need is greater than if you are well."

Jon was looking confused and trying to think of arguments against what was being said.

Suddenly, Pete had his hand up, "Yea, I know what you mean. It is like having two glasses of water, but one is much higher than the other. If you try to fill the glasses up with **exactly the same amount**, all you achieve is that one of the glasses spills over the top. It would be better to give one of the glasses more than the other."

"Precisely," said Mr Goman, "equality is not about treating people the same. Sometimes some people need a helping hand and need to be given a little more. We need to consider the needs of people equally."

Jon's mind wandered back to his Maths lesson, and suddenly understood what they were talking about.