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Can Schools Change Society?'

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ABSTRACT This article reviews the extent to which effectiveness strategies have compensated for social disadvantage, explores the reasons offered over time for the association between disadvantage and less good student outcomes, and argues that contemporary optimism and pessimism about change and progress relate to a neo-liberal paradigm that has little to say about children's learning and even less about the slow evolution of mind and society.

Introduction

As the dust settles on a golden age of public investment and large-scale intervention, New Labour's education drive (1997-2010) seems to have had limited success in raising skills and increasing life chances. The benefits of government policies designed to increase participation at every age and stage, and to enhance school effectiveness, have proved elusive. Despite the near doubling of the percentage achieving five good GCSE grades since 1990, young people today appear no less vulnerable to recession and unemployment than previous generations, and no more likely to rise beyond the world of their parents (DCSF, 2008; Milburn, 2009).

Abundant evidence of persistent, ever-growing inequality and declining inter-generational mobility warns us that education has not closed the historic gap between rich and poor, and has not altered our society as reformers from Robert Owen to Tony Blair hoped and even expected (Clark, 2009, Milburn, 2009). Instead, Bernstein's (1970, p. 344) remark that 'education cannot compensate for society' seems justified, and there are grounds for believing that the formative relationship between school and community may be the reverse of that anticipated by campaigners for educational and social change. Poverty and disadvantage seem to exert a consistently stronger influence than teachers, schools and education (Barker, 2010).

Are children's abilities and backgrounds so different, so deeply embedded and so influential, therefore, that they are beyond the reach of improved access and effective teaching? Does flat-line data mean that we must surrender our faith that education can transform lives and contribute to a better society, accepting at last Ivan Illich's claim that 'universal education through schooling is not feasible' (1970, p. 2)?

There is an alternative explanation, however, for the last government's failure to break the seemingly relentless relationship between disadvantage and disappointing educational outcomes. Since 1988, school reform has provided a neo-liberal policy framework for an individualist educational narrative in which students win prizes and climb ladders. Equal opportunities are supposed to legitimize society by ensuring social mobility and fairness, with talented individuals rising to leading positions and everyone having the chance to improve their skills and usefulness. Continuing inequality and the dragging consequences of disadvantage seriously threaten this otherwise attractive neo-liberal conception of social compensation. Despite more than a decade of well-funded school effectiveness research, and the hyper-activity of government agencies, students from less prosperous groups are not climbing the ladders they should. Has competitive individualism in education failed? Are there other ways in which education can compensate for society?

This article therefore reviews the extent to which effectiveness strategies have compensated for social disadvantage, explores the reasons offered over time for the association between disadvantage and less good student outcomes, and argues that contemporary optimism and pessimism about change and progress relate to a neo-liberal paradigm that has little to say about children's learning and even less about the slow evolution of mind and society.

Effectiveness and Disadvantage

Headline figures suggest rising standards but critics have increasingly drawn attention to important weaknesses in official data. Tymms and Merrell (2007), for example, have reviewed multiple sources of evidence about standards in reading and mathematics at age 11, and conclude that performance has 'remained fairly constant' since the 1950s. The increase in five good GCSE grades between 1990 and 2009 is less impressive than it seems, since better test and examination results 'do not necessarily correspond with rises on other tests for which pupils have not been specifically prepared' (Coe, 2009). The enhanced performance suggested by school and university examinations almost disappears when adjustments are made for grade inflation (Mansell, 2007).

Schools are supposed to be the primary agents of improvement but expert analysis of national datasets concludes that 'in terms of traditional school outcomes it makes little difference which school a pupil attends' (Gorard, 2010, p. 761). Successive governments have invested immense resources in school reform and improvement but it appears now that individual institutions have

only a marginal impact on relative student performance. Grades have improved, but standards seem to have remained the same.

Whatever has happened overall, there are sharp performance differences between rich and poor students. Of the children eligible for Free School Meals (FSM) in 2007, 35 per cent achieved five good GCSE grades; of the children not eligible for FSM, 63 per cent achieved the five good GCSE target (Child Poverty Action Group [CPAG], 2010). The impact of social geography is even more obvious when neighbouring districts are compared. In the Holme Wood area of South Bradford, West Yorkshire, for example, a predominantly white working-class area, only 3.3 per cent of teenagers achieved the expected benchmark of five good GCSEs including English and maths. In nearby Ilkley, the figure was 86.3 per cent (Frean, 2008). There are no reasonable grounds for arguing, as government ministers have done, that poverty does not cripple achievement (Frean, 2009).

The news on social mobility is equally discouraging. The UK income gap has increased so that the richest fifth of the population has 7.2 times more income than the poorest fifth, a ratio that is one of the highest in the free world and is probably the result of government policy changes, since differentials have been relatively stable in many other countries (Clark, 2009). Access to top jobs has become less rather than more socially representative. People from better-off homes and private schools take up a disproportionately high percentage of university places and professional occupations (Milburn, 2009).

Despite massive public investment and intensive reform, therefore, young people seem no more skilful and capable than before, and society continues to be remarkably unequal, with few individuals rising beyond expectations based on their social origins. Does this mean that disadvantage must inevitably translate into educational and social failure, and that schools cannot compensate for society? Is Illich right that universal education is 'not feasible' (1970, p. 2)? Should we give up?

Explaining Failure

Policy makers seem surprised that low status children continue to do less well than those from more prosperous backgrounds. As education secretary, Ed Balls blamed school leaders for the lack of progress, protesting that 'anybody who says a high percentage of disadvantaged children in a school is a reason for poor performance … is badly letting down local children and communities. It's something we don't want to hear' (Frean, 2009). When children are divided into 10 bands of affluence and deprivation, however, achievement rises with wealth in every subject and at every level (BBC News, 2007). The Department for Education and Skills (DfES) has itself commissioned research that shows attainment is significantly below national expectations in districts that 'have relatively high levels of deprivation' (2001) and that the main factors influencing student performance in former coalfield areas are those associated with 'extreme social disadvantage' (2003).

Despite the overwhelming evidence, politicians seem genuinely puzzled that when successful parents endow their children with every cultural advantage, including private education three times more costly than the state equivalent, the results are better than those from families suffering from unemployment, limited resources, and ill health. This bewilderment may be due to the confusion induced by ceaseless argument about the causes of relative underachievement. Between the wars, there was a broad consensus that disadvantage and low achievement were two sides of the same coin. Cyril Burt's work on intelligence tests and his studies of identical twins raised separately seemed to demonstrate that differences in ability or dullness were inherited and innate. Few children won scholarships in Stepney and Bethnal Green because the ability of children in lower social groups was below par (Rushton, 2002). Secondary education was deemed unnecessary for most poor children.

By the 1950s, however, radical critics were refuting Burt's widely accepted conclusions on the grounds that IQ tests were invalid and unreliable (Simon, 1953). Scores were based on data gathered at a single event and did not explain the acquisition and development of learning ability over time. The claim that test items could define and measure a unitary phenomenon called 'intelligence' depended on self-referential evidence and ignored talents and skills not captured by paper and pencil responses. Simon argued that 'such tests basically reflected social class differences' and that the emphasis should be switched to 'the educability of the ordinary child' (Simon, 1991, p. 176).

At the same time, there was growing criticism of a divided school system that seemed to be weighted against children from lower occupational groups. There was a 'colossal waste of talent in working-class children'. The obstacle was not limited innate intelligence amongst the lower orders but a class bias that denied access to high quality education. Social and educational structures were seen to constrain opportunity in ways that were fundamentally unfair (Jackson & Marsden, 1986, p. 16).

These conclusions contributed to the death of the eleven plus and helped the growth of comprehensive education in the 1970s. Advocates claimed that improved opportunities would contribute to individual and social progress, and reduce inequality, and so campaigned for democratic, community schools that would meet everyone's needs. Even as access improved (Benn & Simon, 1970), investigators began to identify numerous obstacles to successful education in deprived areas. The children of parents in manual occupations were likely to be in lower streams and to perform less well than their non-manual contemporaries. Teachers were likely to underestimate manual workers' children, who tended to leave school early, and to drop out of further and higher education (Hargreaves, 1982).

Wealthier families were found to possess social and cultural capital that could be converted into academic success, so that education was an instrument of cultural reproduction rather than social mobility or change (Bordieu & Passeron, 1977). More prosperous, literate families were believed to use an 'elaborated' language code better adapted for academic education than the

'restricted code' adopted by disadvantaged groups (Bernstein, 1971). Working class boys, participating in a game they could not win, were said to define themselves in opposition to teachers and classroom learning, and to create a defensive culture of masculine solidarity (Sennett & Cobb, 1972). Poor health was found to have implications for attendance, stamina, concentration and perceptions of self-efficacy (Lasker & Mascie-Taylor, 1989). All these debates were further confused by social change, including the near disappearance of employment in large scale manufacturing industry, and by the multiple intersections of class and gender.

Other explanations were offered from a variety of perspectives. Conservative-minded educators claimed that the neglect of traditional values and priorities was responsible for social and educational failure (Boyson, 1975). Some on the left preferred to believe that schools were intrinsically oppressive and should be abandoned (Illich, 1971); or that the consequences of social inequality were inescapable and would prove very difficult to change or transcend (Lowe, 1997).

Eventually, more positive reforming voices were heard, with improvement and effectiveness researchers eager to argue that a judicious mix of cultural change and classroom science had the potential to transform life chances (Rutter et al, 1979). The message that schools could make a difference after all became increasingly attractive for policy-makers, whose imperative was to increase social engagement and efficiency. Since the 1988 Education Reform Act, policies designed to improve school effectiveness have become all pervasive and no one is allowed to doubt the 'educability of the ordinary child'.

Can Schools Change Society?

Despite great expectations, a sustained, large-scale effectiveness campaign has made little difference to the essential gradient of our society. Intake has proved a more powerful influence on test and examination results than classroom science. Some students from less well off families succeed but the association between disadvantage and less good test and examination scores remains strong (Vasagar & Williams, 2010). Serious investment in buildings, resources and new opportunities has not reduced the marked differences in student outcome that both reflect and perpetuate inequality and injustice.

These negative findings suggest that New Labour's programme was seriously flawed, with the result that education *has not* compensated for society. The last government obliged schools and families to compete with one another for qualifications, and failed to encourage personal growth and development. Policy makers aimed to maximise individual children's test and examination scores, not to enrich their learning experiences. The curriculum was designed around skills and knowledge believed to contribute to economic usefulness, while singing, music, art, dance, drama and poetry became less important subjects, mainly because they are not easily measured in numerical terms (Shepherd, 2009). Children's lives were impoverished rather than transformed

by a test-driven education that crushed their expressiveness and creativity (Cambridge Primary Review, 2009).

The disadvantaged were let down by this unproductive obsession with tests and examinations, not by the schools and teachers who wondered how a competitive scramble for results could benefit people near the bottom of the pile. A poor child inevitably struggles to catch up with a rich one, even when given an equally good education (Illich, 1970). Is there a school anywhere in the world where substantial numbers of students, placed in the bottom set on entry, eventually achieve well-above average scores? New Labour's inability to 'close the gap' shows that effectiveness-based reforms were misconceived, but does not help resolve the continuing ideological debate about whether education *can* compensate for society. The failure of the performative agenda does not mean that we should give up on the educability of the ordinary child, or conclude that schools cannot contribute to richer lives and a better society.

Alternative Visions

Since the days of Robert Owen (1969), millenarian visions of individuals and communities transcending economic reality, through a mixture of education, talent and hard work, have hampered our understanding of the relationship between learning and social change. Despite the surface rationality of effectiveness research, concerned with factors, variables and datasets, the neo-liberal school reform programme has proved to be no more than a modern version of an ancient utopian dream, in which motivated individuals climb to the mountain top and inherit the earth. Such lofty heights provide a poor vantage point from which to appreciate the beating of butterfly wings in distant classrooms, where history moves as 'invisibly in its incessant transformations as the forest in spring' (Pasternak, 1957).

Policy makers, seduced by effectiveness research, have failed to notice that schooling is intrinsic to social and cultural evolution, so cannot be made more 'efficient' or 'effective' in isolation from the processes and activities that contribute to education. Better lessons, whatever their origin, are inevitably enmeshed in the context and culture to which they belong. Educators are not unmoved movers, external to the society for which compensation is deemed necessary, but formative influences on existing structures.

Malcolm Gladwell (2008) offers an alternative to self-help, rags to riches narratives in which gifted, determined individuals transcend their circumstances and rise to eminent or wealthy positions in a single generation. He argues that success depends on the accumulation of small advantages by families and communities, and on circumstances that provide relevant opportunities. Fourteen of the 75 richest people in history, for example, happen to be Americans born within nine years of one another (1831-1840). According to Gladwell, complex interactions of time, place and human culture create propitious conditions in which some people are positioned to exploit chances that did not exist for their ancestors. This insight suggests a continuous adaptive

process, through which individuals and groups respond to a changing environment, with accumulated advantages and disadvantages enabling or hindering their attempts to make or lose ground. In this perspective, individual success and failure cease to be the outcome of heroic personal qualities that eclipse the past, and become instead passing moments in family and community trajectories through time and change.

Once the adaptive, social nature of human development is acknowledged, the limitations of individualism and genetic determinism in education become obvious. Ability and talent are not innate, fixed attributes of a limited number of people, but genetic potentials that must be activated and nurtured through experience. Juveniles form trillions of synapses as they adapt to their environment, but from the age of eight, unused neurons are discarded and lost. Everyone has the potential to thrive but without early opportunities, stimulus and practice, native capacity withers and dies, perpetuating disadvantage and inhibiting the processes of personal growth that contribute to achievement. Small advantages increase the chance that children's experiences will strengthen their development, but without such benefits, progress is likely to remain elusive, however good the arrangements for formal learning (Smail, 2008).

Disadvantage should not, therefore, be considered a uniform condition from which a talented few may escape, but as a field where complex webs of help and hindrance have a cumulative but differential impact on individuals, families and communities. Whatever children's latent ability, effective schools cannot overcome social complexity so that every student has the same start point, the same opportunity and the same chance of success.

Compensating for Society

We have simply under-estimated what is involved in compensating for society, and have too readily assumed that everyone will benefit from general improvement. We have opted for a simplistic, individualist regime where students at supposedly 'effective' schools are believed to be in charge of their own destinies, unhindered by personal or social baggage. We have failed to understand that knowledge and skills are cultural phenomena, products of a long history of unequal relationships rather than disembodied information, available to the hardest worker. We have hopelessly muddled our social and educational goals, so that learning is valued for its potential impact on inequality rather than its catalytic influence on children's thinking. We have discounted time and context.

The logic of Ed Balls is that with equally good schools, all children can achieve government benchmark results or better, and through better grades dissolve the occupational pyramid forever. This is nonsense. Qualifications are more likely to act as a labour market rationing mechanism than to guarantee enhanced skill and access (Brown, 2001). Struggling schools are the victims of competitive individualism, not potential agents of transformation.

This assessment is realistic rather than pessimistic. We should acknowledge the truth that despite a massive growth in qualifications, neo-liberal school reforms are further than ever from bringing about social justice, and adopt much more modest educational aims. If we are serious about compensating for the bleak, dehumanising consequences of our desperately unequal and unfair society, there is a great deal that can be done.

We must give up the idea of learning as a race for workplace usefulness and skills, and instead design a new curriculum around personal growth and development, so that children's own experience is both valued and extended, especially through the arts. We should emphasise activity, fun and enjoyment, and treat competitive examinations as an unfortunate necessity, not the rationale of the system. We should encourage teachers by liberating their passion and imagination, and avoid punishment at all costs. We must stop telling them what to do and suppress the desire to judge merit through test results that are the least important outcome of learning. We must insist on comprehensive community schools that serve all our young people without discrimination. Education that makes a difference is incalculable, immeasurable and unfathomable. What learning led to Shakespeare's comedies, tragedies and histories, or Einstein's sense of time? Above all, young people should be encouraged to believe in themselves and to open their minds to new ideas and experiences.

Learning compensates for society gradually, by increasing knowledge and understanding, by creating new perceptions, and by contributing to the movement of the forest, where countless butterflies beat their wings, unbidden and unheard.

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