
How Possible Is Socially Just Education under Neo-liberal Capitalism? Struggling against the Tide?

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ABSTRACT In 2012 the author wrote about what a socially just system would look like, and used the example of Finland. Since then the already emergent aspects of neo-liberalism within Finnish education have grown, as privileged white parents increasingly demand privileged spaces within comprehensive schools for their children. There are radical spaces within education, but they, too, are usually the preserve of the privileged within society, and so cannot be equated with socially just spaces. What socially just education requires is that people from all sections of society commit, and hold fast, to a notion of 'the common educational good' that transcends individual or family self-interest. This is at a time when it is becoming increasingly difficult to persuade those with the greatest power of choice in English society to see themselves as sharing the same common interests and purposes as those who are less privileged. Against this difficult context, this article argues that it is more important than ever to fight for socially just education.

Introduction: 'it was ever thus'?

In his Fabian booklet 'Politicians, Equality, and Comprehensives' (1971), Dennis Marsden argued that it was difficult selling egalitarianism to an electorate that had shown itself to be largely indifferent to the social divisiveness of the educational system. A poll in 1957 had shown that only 10% of the UK public felt that segregated education was socially undesirable (Parkinson, 1970). So, despite the torrent of educational policy changes over the last 20 years, it appears that some things remain the same as they were 70 years ago. One consequence of the continuing high tolerance of elitism and unfairness in the educational system is that, under contemporary neo-liberalism, divisive and unfair perspectives have become enshrined in educational policy.

rather than being challenged and changed. As Nick Stevenson (2015, p. 535) argues, we are currently seeing the break-up of the comprehensive system and its rapid replacement by an academy system which is both more selective and more fragmented than the system it replaces, as well as less democratic. James Meek (2016, p. 8) points out that both Labour and Conservative governments have been involved in a process of semi-privatisation of education that leaves it 'ripe for the introduction of flat fees for usage in the future'. Meek suggests that one word to describe it might be 'autonomisation', the process by which state-run bodies continue to be funded by the state but are run autonomously on a non-profit basis.

So we are seeing radical changes in the state educational system in England, changes that are transforming the purposes of education, the ways in which it is funded, teaching and learning, and inevitably relationships between teachers and taught. One of the most powerful illustrations of the latter was a letter written by a teacher to Nicky Morgan, Secretary of State for Education at the time of writing, published in the *New Statesman* (Brown, 2016). She reflected that:

In some ways I don't feel like a teacher at all any more. I prepare children for tests and, if I'm honest, I do it quite well. It's not something I'm particularly proud of as it's not as if it provided my class with any transferable, real life skills during the process. They've not enjoyed it, I've not enjoyed it but we've done it: and one thing my children know how to do is answer test questions. They've written raps about how to answer test questions, they've practised test questions at home and test questions in school, they've had extra tuition to help them understand the test questions. They can do test questions – they just haven't had time to do anything else ... worse than being a teacher in this system is being a child at the mercy of it.

While teachers are leaving the teaching profession in increasing numbers (Weston, 2013) in despair at this sterile, joyless practice of teaching to the test, children do not have a choice to leave. Unsurprisingly, English children's sense of well-being in school was lower than all but one other country in a global research survey conducted in 2015 (Rees & Main, 2015). The survey concluded that the adverse impact of testing was one cause, but equally important was the poor quality of relationships between teachers and students.

But the symbolic violence enacted in and through the educational system does not impact on all children equally. In relation to the degree of educational and emotional damage inflicted, there is something else that also remains the same. It is predominantly working-class children who suffer the most. The educational system is eroding the freedom to learn of all children, but it is still working-class children who have the least opportunities for fulfilling learning that realises their potential. Whereas in the past the damage came through failing the 11-plus examination and being relegated to schools seen to be second rate, now working-class children, although nominally receiving the same

education in 'comprehensive' schools, are subject to a narrowing of the curriculum (Royal Society of Arts, 2015), and a degree of teaching to the test not experienced by their middle-class peers. This is because, despite our 'comprehensive system', they are still disproportionately attending schools seen to be second rate, and such schools are often pressurised into focusing on raising test scores at the expense of providing a broad and enriching curriculum. So the cruelties of education which afflict all children are compounded for those who are the most disadvantaged.

Not Just an English Issue but a Global Flow towards Greater Inequality in Education

Unfortunately, the onslaught on democratic, socially just education is not just an English issue, but is a global phenomenon. In Finland, the country most lauded for its socially just educational system, there have been rapid policy changes as Finland's so-called comprehensive schools, especially those in urban areas, are seeing increasing numbers of selective classes, entry to which requires ample resources of economic, cultural and social capital (Kosunen, 2016). As Kosunen concludes:

The egalitarian Finnish comprehensive education system, historically based on the principle of one school for all, has aimed to offer equal opportunities to all children in terms of education and future occupation regardless of social class, gender, ethnicity or place of residence. There seems to be some diversification of educational provision, at least symbolically, in cities, and family capital, especially social capital, strongly influences school choices. The question of equal access to good education thus needs to be raised. Is the Finnish comprehensive school on its way to segmentation through social distinction and even closure?

This move towards greater selection, which has brought with it greater segregation, is one reason for Finland's falling Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) results (Bernelius & Vaattovaara, 2016). Bernelius and Vaattovaara conclude that growing polarization in Finnish urban areas has resulted in the average learning outcomes of the less advantaged economic groups deteriorating as a result of school choices, while those of the advantaged groups are improving, increasing social class and ethnic attainment gaps in a country which is seen to have one of the fairest educational systems across the globe. In the face of such evidence, and the dismal PISA results in our own grossly unequal educational system in England, many educationalists, including myself, struggle to make sense of the justifications for continuing along a path that sediments the old inequalities while introducing new ones. So what can be done?

Turning the Tide: possibilities for a National Education Service

A socially just educational system is one premised on the maxim that a good education is the democratic right of all rather than a prize to be competitively fought over. It is also one which seeks to value and enhance children's well-being as well as their intellectual growth.
(Reay, 2014)

What we desperately need in contemporary neo-liberal times are totally different ways of envisioning education; ways that accord respect and value to all children and their teachers (Reay, 2012). This is a moral issue as well as an educational one. As Jeremy Corbyn (2015) succinctly argues in making a case for a National Education Service, 'Education is not about personal advancement but is a collective good that benefits our society and our economy'.

In order to move towards a society built on these principles, classrooms would have to operate very differently from the stressful, task-driven, target-led, overly competitive environments they are currently. And while the three Rs are important, teaching children to be caring, respectful, cooperative, knowledgeable about their own and others' histories, and well informed about contemporary global issues is equally, if not more, important. There is a great deal of scope for widening currently narrowly conceived teaching and learning opportunities, and for developing disruptive pedagogies (Freire, 1998) that encourage students to question as well as develop social and political awareness. Part of the process requires a revalorizing of vocational and working-class knowledges and a broadening out of what constitutes educational success beyond the narrowly academic (Reay, 2011). There needs to be not only a focus on, and valuing of, the existing knowledges of working-class young people, but also pedagogies which emphasise collectivist, rather than individualistic approaches to learning.

Although the British public has seemingly been swept up by the mantra of choice and raising aspiration in education, there is a strong, but often overlooked and neglected, grass-roots opposition to the contemporary educational status quo among the British population. The vast majority of parents, when asked what they most want for their children in education, reply that they want their children to be happy. It is this grass-roots concern with self-fulfilment over and above self-advancement that reveals the gaps and fissures in neo-liberal dominance. British social attitudes about education are not all of a piece; they are deeply ambivalent and contradictory. Even in neo-liberal times like the present, research shows that the vast majority of British people still see education as a right that should be made available to all rather than a commodity to be competed for in an educational marketplace. Sixty-three per cent of people in Britain agree that parents ought to send their children to the nearest state school (Exley, 2012). A further 22% 'would agree' in a context of greater equity between schools. It seems unconvincing, then, to claim that either an educational marketplace or a privileged fee-paying private sector is what the

public 'wants'. The majority of people surveyed agreed that the quality of education children receive should be the same for everyone, with only a minority believing that parents should be able to pay for better education for their own children (Exley, 2012). The history of education has been a history of valorizing elitism, and privileging the already privileged, but such a history has been despite, rather than because of, the wishes and desires of the majority of the British public.

Conclusion

Education has always been a means of pacifying and controlling the masses rather than educating them (Smith, 1982), but the time has never been more opportune for a reassessment of what education could and should be if we are to have a fair and democratic system that provides all children with the freedom to learn. The enduring problem of education in the United Kingdom is that it has never had a ruling class committed to providing a good education for all its citizens. The ideological prejudices of the UK elite, as was the case 100 years ago, is that a good education is to be found in the private sector, has to be paid for, and needs to be highly selective and exclusive.

While their own children's education is 'guarded by an electric fence' (Moore, 2016), the education of everybody else's child is a means to ideological point scoring, and an opportunity for future profit making. If we are really committed to democratic, fair education that provides all children with the freedom to learn and realise their potential, we need to wrest back education from those who have no intrinsic interest in it over and above their self-reproduction, and the further enrichment of their political backers. A democratic grass-roots movement campaigning for a National Education Service is one place to start.

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