
The State Education Is In: recognising the challenge of achieving a fair educational system in post-Brexit, austerity England

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ABSTRACT This article examines the problem of the wider economic and political context for any project aimed at achieving a fairer educational system. The consequences of the current status quo can be seen in diminishing funding and rising inequalities. The author argues that the answer lies not in tinkering with an unjust education system but rather in big, bold initiatives that are transformative rather than incremental.

Introduction

At a time when, according to a recent editorial in *The Sunday Times* (*The Sunday Times*, 2017), the British no longer resent the rich but rather celebrate their success and try to join them, the prevailing attitude to poverty is that the poor need to pull themselves up by their bootstraps, seize their opportunities, develop resilience and become as successful as the already privileged without access to the resources and connections that make such success possible. The Rich List in the same issue of *The Sunday Times* proudly celebrates the fact that the richest in society increased their wealth by 14% in 2016. According to the Resolution Foundation (2013), between 1995 and 2010 the top 1% of earners saw their slice of pre-tax income increase from 7% to 10% while the bottom 50% of the UK population saw their share drop from 19% to 18%.

While income inequality in the UK is greater than in many other European countries (Dorling 2015), wealth is even more unequally distributed than income. The Gini coefficient is 0.69 for wealth. This compares with 0.35 for net income (Resolution Foundation, 2017). Also, household wealth in the

UK has become more concentrated over the last decade, increasing economic inequalities (Resolution Foundation, 2017). Compounding these trends in inequality is the long-term political project of the political establishment to return the UK to the pre-Second World War dominance of the private sector (Toynbee & Walker, 2017). Toynbee and Walker conclude that the cuts in public services, credits and benefits currently proposed will cause inequality to take off as steeply as it did in the 1980s, with child poverty hitting 30% by 2020.

But the material consequences are equalled by the ideological repercussions. For our governing elite the state has become an entity that is regarded with suspicion, a part of the nation that is characterised as 'falling apart', 'stuck in the past', 'hidebound by bureaucracy and inefficiency'. Ironically, the most memorable positive image of the public sector is the one paraded in the 2012 Olympics opening ceremony where we were regaled with the accomplishments of the NHS. The programme for the event celebrated the NHS as 'the institution which more than any other unites our nation'. But few have pointed out that this collective nostalgia was in relation to a past, adequately funded NHS that had not yet been hollowed out by lack of funds and the private sector's insatiable quest for profit (Naylor, 2017). In relation to the current situation of dire underfunding, asset stripping by the private sector, extremely low staff morale and rising resignations, there is a complex mixture of public responses, ranging from resignation and denial to unfairly blaming public-sector workers struggling in poorly funded, stressful situations. To understand why there has been no concerted movement to protect 'our national treasure' from the degradations of insufficient funding and privatisation we need to examine contemporary English political culture.

The Reluctant, Resigned Individualism of the English

We are living in an England where most people espouse 'a resigned reluctant individualism' (Taylor-Gooby, 2013), a country where feelings of fellowship and connection, empathy and understanding across social differences and an inclusive sense of community have diminished within the working class and have never been part of normative middle- and upper-class identity. The response of the political elite to an austerity created by our economic elite has been to penalise the poorest and impose an austerity education on their children. This has happened because we are increasingly living in a society where self-interest is valorised, and where commitments to the common good are perceived as naïve and outdated. Grasso et al (2017) found that those coming of age during Thatcher's and Major's time in office are particularly conservative, and deserving of the label 'Thatcher's Children'. But more concerning, they found evidence of her 'grandchildren' in the generation born between 1979 and 1990. These 'Blair's Babies' are even more right wing and authoritarian in their attitudes to redistribution and welfare. UK young people are among the least likely among the 20 countries surveyed to think it is

important to contribute to wider society beyond themselves and their family and friends. As Grasso et al (2017) conclude, as a generation they are more likely than their parents and grandparents to agree income inequality is too small and state benefits are too high. Such findings are borne out in Peter Taylor Gooby's conclusion:

The mass public appears less sympathetic to the poor, less generous to the unemployed and less concerned about inequalities. These patterns are reflected in newspaper discourse and the programmes of political parties. The upshot is that the pressures on the poor and on those parts of the welfare state that provide for them are increasingly severe, while there is little support for policies to address these issues. (Taylor-Gooby, 2013, p. 40)

As Taylor-Gooby comments in relation to the British focus groups he interviewed in 2015, 'no one mentioned a collective solution to the problems they identified at all. It was as if institutions like trade unions and local government had never existed' (Taylor-Gooby, personal communication, February 2017). The fight for social justice in education is also a fight to challenge and change the right-wing, individualistic, anti-state attitudes that are becoming common across all sectors and generations of British society. These attitudes, and the resigned reluctant individualism of many across the political spectrum, have allowed the political right to forge ahead with their project of privatising state education.

Education as Enterprise

Education has become a business – it is no longer seen as a service the state provides for its citizens at collective expense. Over the last decade we have witnessed a number of absurd schemes, from free schools to the new generation of grammar schools, cynically executed. The same stealth process of privatisation that has beset the NHS already has a stranglehold on English state education. From school buildings and playgrounds that have been sold to multinational property companies to academy chains providing free school places at over 50% of the cost of a state-maintained school place (National Audit Office 2017), English state education is being privatised, over a comparatively short period of time and with very little public debate (Johnson & Mansell, 2014). And it is important to emphasise that these trends of dismembering the public sector and privatising education are more entrenched and advanced in England than in either Wales or Scotland, which is why the main emphasis is on England rather than the UK more broadly.

So what state is English education in? It is becoming increasingly fragmented and atomised with a diminishing sense of collectivity and collaboration. This applies not only to relationships between schools but also to those within classrooms. Over the last 30 years, UK politicians and policy makers have seemed intent on moving away from educational approaches that

work, such as collaborative teaching and learning methods (Kyndt et al, 2013) and mixed-attainment grouping (Kulik & Kulik, 1982), towards those that don't. We've been bombarded with a plethora of educational policies such as standards, testing regimes, league tables, school choice, academies and free schools, the return to traditional models of both primary and secondary curriculum, performance and managerialism, academic and vocational streaming, punitive strategies such as naming and shaming of schools, and a preoccupation with 'school improvement' and 'school effectiveness', all of which have had little or no impact on educational inequalities, and many of which have increased children's stress and reduced their levels of well-being (Ipsos-Mori, 2011).

The Labour government under Blair and Brown, the coalition government and now the Conservatives have all, to varying degrees, committed themselves to these policies despite their negligible effect on educational achievement or educational inequalities, and their negative influence on children's mental health. Rather, in the twenty-first century there is increasing recognition that while educational policies have impacted on children's experiences in school and their levels of well-being, they have had a relatively small impact on their educational achievement. One review suggested that in relevant studies the amount of variance in pupil performance due to schools was found to range between 5% and 18% (Chevalier et al, 2005), while a later study found the percentage attributed to schools was 14% (Cassen & Kingdon, 2007). This suggests that the educational policies that would make a difference have yet to be implemented. Currently, pupil achievement is overwhelmingly due to a mix of family circumstances, individual characteristics and social background, while school factors have only a minor impact. There need to be wide-ranging changes in education policy, but also in broader economic and social policy, if we are to achieve a fair educational system (Reay, 2017).

Conclusion: a battle worth fighting

In earlier work (Reay, 2012), I have argued that tinkering with an unjust educational system that is not fit for purpose is a totally inadequate response to the perilous state English education is in. Education is in a parlous state because on the one hand a majority of our political establishment do not want state education, they want privatised education, preferably run for profit, but on the other hand it is in a dire state because there is a lack of political will among a majority of the English public to fund a state education service if it involves them personally paying more for the service. This is the challenge faced by those of us committed to a fairer education system which realises the potential of all, not the few. The right has succeeded by thinking the impossible – putting forward big and bold policies such as the privatisation of the English state educational system, the reintroduction of selective schooling, a rigorous testing regime that starts with five-year-olds, and the imposition of a traditional inward-looking National Curriculum.

We on the left need to be no less transgressive in our thinking. In the current troubled social and economic context we need big, bold initiatives, not small, incremental ones, policies that are both transformative but also evidence-based in terms of their ability to improve teaching and learning for all students and staff. So, for example, a system of locally based school collectives that support rather than compete with each other; free nursery education for all; the introduction of mixed-attainment teaching; the abolition of selection; and a curriculum that has critical thinking skills and political and social awareness at its core. But above all, England and English education need a progressive tax system that taxes the rich, provides tax breaks for the low paid, and deals harshly with tax evasion with the aim of halving the gap between the rich and the poor within a decade. Gaining support for such policies will entail an extremely difficult ideological battle when we consider the entrenched position of the political establishment and widespread attitudes across English society on both the public sector and taxation. Yet far too much remains at stake to relinquish this fight.

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