From worse to worse

Why is it so difficult to change English education for the better?

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Abstract

This article, as coruscating as it is well-grounded, sketches the appallingly unfair state of contemporary education in England. It outlines the historical and contemporary drivers of that unfairness and the consequences that ensue in the lives of young people. It calls for a renewed movement on the left to call out the education system's shocking injustice and replace the values which have made that system so resistant to progressive change with an ethos better suited to humane comprehensive education.
Keywords: educational justice; inequality; neo-liberalism; school funding; student well-being; compliance; PISA; educational values

Introduction

In the UK we have proved to be particularly bad at changing our educational system. While other countries, including Finland, Estonia and Singapore, have all made radical changes to their educational system that have resulted in greater equality and progressive improvements,[1] our educational system remains as divided and inequitable as it was 100 years ago. Although, educational achievement levels have risen across the board, the attainment gaps between the different social classes in the UK remain as entrenched as ever, and have been exacerbated by the Covid pandemic.[2]

Understanding why our system is so unresponsive, while other educational systems are able either to transform themselves, as in the case of Finland and Estonia, or engage in a generative process of reflection and change, as in the case of Singapore, requires both a historical and a wider societal lens. The UK, and particularly the English, educational system has always been an elite hierarchical one in which the three social classes are mainly educated separately from each other. From its inception, English education has been a system that educates the different social classes for different social and economic purposes. As T. S. Eliot wrote in *Notes towards the Definition of Culture* in 1948: 'the function of schooling is to preserve the class and select the elite'.[3] Inequality is at the very core of our educational system, sedimented into its values and ethos. The private school system enables our political and economic elites to preserve their status and protect their cultural distinction. The latest research shows that private schools have 3.7 times more income per student than the state sector,[4] while a recent Institute of Fiscal Studies report reveals how the gap between private school fees and state school spending per pupil has more than doubled over the last decade.[5] Private schools also

DOI: 10.3898/FORUM.2022.64.1.01

remain as socially exclusive as they were 50 years ago with just 1 per cent of their pupils on free bursaries.[6]

The popular illusion is that our state school system is much more inclusive, educating the different social classes together. But that is a fallacy. Even in the 'heyday' of the comprehensive movement, setting and streaming within schools was endemic.[7] Brian Jackson wrote of how the educational system treated children as if they comprised three broad classes – the gold, the silver and the baser metals, a threefold division that had 'magical persistence in popular thinking'.[8] It still does. Children of gold are to be found in the private school system. The silver children are primarily in our schools designated as 'good' or 'outstanding' by Ofsted. And if a child of lesser metal manages to gain a place in a so-called good school, they are nearly always relegated to the lower sets. That leaves the children of baser metals in the schools designated inadequate or requiring improvement by Ofsted. Recent research found that schools in the poorest and richest fifth of England, when judged by levels of poverty, received very different grades: only 4 per cent of the most disadvantaged schools were judged 'outstanding', compared with 58 per cent of the most affluent.[9] This is a ratio of 15 to one. The contemporary emphasis on inclusion is primarily babble, having little impact on actual practice in schools. Rather, our state system remains a bipartite system that separates the social classes either into schools that are predominately working- or middle-class or divides them internally between high and low sets.[10]

The consequences of compounding historical elitism with contemporary neo-liberalism

Over the past 40 years, the powerful currents of unfairness, exclusion and elitism that have always run through the English educational system have been reinforced and re-channelled through the neo-liberal drive to markets, privatisation, hyper-competition and individualism. English education has become increasingly fragmented and atomised with a diminishing sense of collectivity and collaboration. This has had serious repercussions for both pupils and teachers' well-being. While the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) reported that in 78 per cent of education systems students achieved more highly when they co-operated rather than competed with their peers, it also identified the UK as one of four countries, including the US and Brazil, where competition in schools was the most prevalent.[11] In the OECD's most recent analysis of PISA (Program for International Student Assessment) results, the UK came 69th out of 72 countries for school students having a positive sense of meaning in life; the UK also had the largest fall in life satisfaction scores for school students, dropping 13 percentage points between 2015 and 2018.[12] Over 50 per cent of British schoolchildren reported feeling miserable all or some of the time, the highest

percentage for all the OECD countries surveyed.

But it is working-class children who are suffering the most. Further analysis of the PISA data indicated that in 2018 the UK had the second largest social class gap (after Latvia) in life satisfaction among the 24 countries surveyed.[13] British children in the highest socio-economic quarter had a mean life satisfaction score of 6.55 – compared to 5.76 for children in the lowest quarter.

The intense competition in English classrooms is mirrored by the growing competition between schools as 'a league table' mentality, and a corrosive standards agenda, pushed by Ofsted, incentivises schools to compete rather than collaborate with each other.[14] Having a test-focused rather than a child-centred education system, a core focus on drill rather than discovery-led learning, and a narrow preoccupation with so-called 'powerful knowledge' at the expense of a broad and balanced curriculum impact on the well-being of teachers as well as children. Equally demoralising has been the deskilling and de-professionalisation of teachers in England. A culture of accountability has resulted in demoralised and fearful teachers, and that demoralisation has been exacerbated by worsening work conditions and a lack of autonomy. Teachers are suffering from the effects of a low-trust culture and the infantilising of a profession that is seen by the governing elite to lack the capacity for independent judgment. An intensification of the processes of de-professionalisation and lack of autonomy are evident in the new initial teacher training (ITT) proposals, overseen by the CEO of a multi-academy trust (MAT). As James Noble-Rogers, executive director of the Universities' Council for the Education of Teachers argues, the proposals: 'represent an existential threat to the very future of the teaching profession and its subsequent ability to provide a high-quality education'.[15] The proposals include an excessive level of prescription that reduces teachers to 'executive technicians' (*ibid.*), and a lack of academic autonomy that, I suggest, is calculated to hasten the withdrawal of a number of universities from providing ITT in a deliberate move towards further de-professionalisation.

A political dereliction of duty: losing sight of the common good

The time for change has never been so urgent. However, changing an education system so that it contributes to building a fairer, more socially just society requires ethical leadership in a society where we have none. The Conservatives have nearly always governed in their own narrow self-interest but particularly so in the post-Brexit era.[16] In particular, our current government has failed the most crucial test of statecraft, which is to govern in the interests of the whole nation.[17] The Conservatives have a track record of appointing education secretaries who have little knowledge of, and expertise in relation to, the education system they are appointed to run. Our current education minister is privately educated, sends his own children to private school and has a

property portfolio of over £50 million. Rather, they have exacerbated sectarian divisions and conflicts, both within schools and beyond, in ways which constitute an abdication of leadership. Our mainly privately educated governing elite are poor custodians of a state system which educates groups in society whom many of that elite consider their intellectual and cultural inferiors.[18] The Labour Party, instead of attempting to guide and lead public opinion, has been led by it, fashioning its policies from focus group consensus and opinion polls. This is a different sort of abdication, but an abdication nonetheless. Consequently, the policies it advocates, such as removing charitable status from private schools and providing additional mental health support in maintained schools,[19] constitute a 'sticking plaster' approach to educational ills, and will do nothing to tackle the causes of educational inequalities.

Making room for love in education

Where does this leave those of us committed to making the educational system a fairer, more socially just place to teach and learn? Fifty years ago, as a young reception class teacher facing 47 four- and five-year-olds in an ethnically diverse, working-class primary school in inner London, I fervently believed that if I loved and cared enough for all the children in my class I could transform their school experiences, and subsequently their educational opportunities. I had hated and feared my own schooling in equal measure. By turns ignored or singled out for negative teacher attention, my survival as a working-class child in an environment that saw little value in me was the result of a combination of my own stubborn obstinacy and an inherited value system and community world view that valorised fighting against injustices. I did succeed educationally, but at the cost of my mental health and development as a well-rounded individual. But I failed as a teacher to transform the life chances of the children I taught. That sense of failure was one of the main reasons that, in my mid-40s, I became a student again. After 20 years of teaching, I realised I needed to better understand why and how the English educational system remained impervious to any changes that made a real difference to working-class children's educational experiences or improved their educational achievement relative to the upper and middle classes.

What I learnt from 30 years of researching education has underscored my intuitive response to educational inequalities 50 years ago. It is the values and ethos that underpin the educational system that we have to change, rather than expect any positive change to emanate from the endless policy implementation of recent decades. We have allowed a harsh judgemental ethos to infuse our increasingly performative educational system, one that, in its preoccupation with results and league table position, pays scant attention to the happiness and well-being of our children and young people. Too many children experience our education system as one enforcing control and compliance.[20] For

example, the contemporary intense focus on discipline through the implementation of behaviour hubs[21] has resulted in increasing numbers of secondary school-aged children facing a constant threat of punishment for misdemeanours, such as not having a top button done up, or forgetting a pen.[22] Such transgressions are either recorded on a 'card of shame' students wear round their neck, or else they are sent to 'reflect' in isolation booths, leading to missed time in the classroom and public humiliation. And it is primarily working-class, ethnic minority and, above all, special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) students who are most subject to such cruelties in the name of behaviour management.

Behaviour management dominates all English classrooms in the 'state' sector, from reception, with its superstar charts, upwards. In research I conducted in infant classrooms in 2019, I interviewed 40 five-, six- and seven-year-olds about the incentive systems in their classrooms. While all children liked being designated a superstar, they also talked about being in the warning and caution zones as 'torture', 'shaming' and 'really upsetting'. As well as highlighting the pervasiveness of behaviour management across all stages of education, the research also revealed a harmful culture of individual excellence. Children talked about 'helping your friend being a form of cheating' and that they had to be 'the best of the best' in order to be seen as a really good learner. Over half the children said there could only be one or two superstars in a class, but that they felt a failure if they did not achieve superstar status. We have reached the ignominious position of achieving an educational system that prioritises discipline, control and individual excellence over creativity, critical thinking, collaboration and teamwork.[23]

I did not succeed 50 years ago because the love and caring I prioritised were never sufficiently valued in the wider educational system. Yet, love and care, then as now, are essential ingredients in a good education system, as well as being central to enabling children to thrive as learners. As John White argues, 'a central task of the school is to reveal to students the manifold forms of love and where possible to nurture their growth'.[24] But forms of love, of any variety, appear to be in short supply, particularly for working-class children who have always been feared as potentially unruly. We seem to have ended up with an educational system that expects the worst of working-class children, rather than nurturing the best.

Structures matter

But 30 years of researching also taught me that structures, and the level and distribution of resources, are also paramount. We no longer have anything that approximates to a comprehensive school system in England. Greany describes the current plethora of school provision:

> At the structural level, in addition to the 152 LAs, by March 2020 there were: around 1200 MATs operating 7600 academies (with each MAT responsible for between two and forty-plus academies); almost 1500 stand-alone academies; eight Regional Schools Commissioners (RSCs – civil servants who oversee the MATs and academies, on behalf of the Secretary of State); around 1500 government designated 'system leader' schools (Teaching School Alliances – TSAs – and National Leaders of Education – NLEs), and a number of quasi-public organisations (e.g. Ambition Institute and the Education Endowment Foundation) fulfilling various ministerial priorities.[25]

The Greany quote does not capture the full extent of the fragmentation of the English education system. In addition to academies, there are also grammar schools, faith schools and free schools. The current 'mis-structuring' of English education into an excess of school types, all with different funding regimes, modes of governance and varying levels of autonomy, has resulted in the mass privatisation of the education system, which will take major legislation to reverse. It has also allowed inequalities in resource allocation to pass largely unnoticed.

A report on free schools found that by 2017 an average of approximately £8.6 million had been spent for each free school that was currently open, a sum far greater than the amount spent over the same period on state-maintained schools.[26] Academies too are more expensive to run than state-maintained schools, despite having a significantly lower rate of pupils eligible for free school meals than their local authority school counterparts: 12.3 per cent compared to 19.5 per cent.[27] So the allocation of funding between different types of schools is unfair. But so is the allocation of funding to different types of students. Overall, school spending per pupil in England fell by 9 per cent in real terms between 2009-10 and 2019-20. This represents the largest cut in over 40 years.[28] But that fall has been greatest in the most deprived schools, which experienced a 13 per cent real-terms fall in spending per pupil between 2014-15 and 2018-19, compared with a 7 per cent fall among the least deprived schools.[29] We have a pupil premium system that is supposed to support the learning of our most deprived learners. But it has never been sufficient to compensate for their much lower levels of family resources, and at a time of coronavirus, when the extent of that disparity in resources has been cruelly exposed, is being stripped back even further.

This, then, is the educational status quo we need to change in order to have a fair, socially just educational system. And changes must address all levels of the system, engaging with macro concerns around structure, and micro issues of teaching and learning in classrooms, as well as questions around the purpose of education.

Better ways of educating

International comparisons of educational systems are beset with conceptual and

practical difficulties, and adopting policies from abroad is confounded by national differences of culture, geography and scale. Yet, regardless of those difficulties, over the past 50 years we have adopted many policy initiatives from the US without, I would argue, informed reflection either on their efficacy or their contribution to socially just education. With those reservations in mind, I want to suggest that there are aspects of the educational systems in the countries I referred to at the beginning of this article that English education could learn from.

Pasi Sahlberg argues that: 'we should reconsider those education policies that advocate choice, competition and privatisation as the key drivers of sustained educational improvement. None of the best-performing education systems today rely primarily on them'.[30] Two of the best-performing systems he was referring to are in Finland and Estonia.[31] Both combine high attainment with some of the most equitable outcomes of all the countries participating in PISA.[32] They both have a social class achievement gap that is a fraction of the one in England. Where our system valorises individual excellence, they prioritise the common good. In place of our incoherent, unfairly funded, fragmented system, they have comprehensive school systems which are well supported at national, regional and local levels. Both countries see the value of well-supported, highly trained and well-prepared teachers who merit considerable autonomy and respect. Their educational systems have a strong explicit focus on equality, and recognise the importance of providing adequate extra resources for both SEND and disadvantaged students. In response to the challenges of the 21st century, they have recently prioritised creativity and critical thinking in their curriculum offer. Furthermore, schools in both Finland and Estonia are commonly viewed not only as centres of learning but of caring. In the pressurised, inequitable, underfunded system we have in England, caring has never really been part of the agenda, and that is probably even less the case with the current preoccupation with performance, targets and accountability. There is little space for caring, let alone love, in our educational system. Instead, we have growing mistrust and ignorance of those who are different from ourselves, as children continue to be educated in social-class silos, and there is little attempt to ameliorate that mistrust and ignorance through either the provision of the curriculum or pedagogic approaches.

Conclusion

There has been enormous change in English education over the last few decades, but it has been a right-wing transformation rather than any movement to make the system fairer. The current Conservative government, and the ones before it, are using the educational system as a vehicle to drive changes they want to see in education and wider society – privatisation, marketisation, traditionalism, individualism and self-reliance.

They are also intent on sedimenting the values of hierarchy, competition, elitism and individual excellence they have valued in their own, often private, education. And because our elite have always been seen to know better than the rest of the population, this right-wing transformation of state education has happened with surprisingly little resistance and critical comment. We have reached a pass in the 21st century where we are still entrusting our state educational system to a group in society who are not prepared to send their own children to the schools the vast majority of children attend. This is not to deny the brilliant campaigning work carried out by organisations such as More-than-a-Score, the Socialist Education Association, the Anti-Academies Alliance and, of course, the National Education Union. But it will never be enough to counter a right-wing elite with the power and resources to push through any ideological changes they want to make. I would argue that the first step to any change for the better is to recognise the appallingly unfair state English education is in and the power of the forces opposing improvement. Only then can we on the left work collectively to challenge effectively. Perhaps with a growing recognition of how broken our educational system is, we can grow a united grassroots movement for transformation, because that is what it will take to enable an educational system that works for all children, not just the few.

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Notes

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