

Class and education: what is to be done?

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Abstract

Marketisation and standards-based reforms are the two policy levers that have been promoted in education systems across much of the world in the past quarter of a century. The claim that is made on their behalf is that these mechanisms are the means whereby longstanding inequalities in the access to educational goods can be ameliorated. This paper draws on recent research to contest this claim, before outlining some aspects of an alternative conception of the relationship between education and social justice.

Key words: Marketisation; standards-based reforms; social mobility; social justice; deficit model; pedagogic relations

I want to start by stating the obvious. Access to, and attainment within, formal education have been differentially distributed along social class lines for longer than the state has interested itself in the provision of schooling. It is worth restating this fact, partly because in the past two decades it has tended to receive far less attention than, say, gender differences in attainment, and partly because it matters: class identities

and divisions have had, and continue to have, profound effects on what education is and how it is experienced.

In this paper, my focus is on education in the UK, and primarily in England. Nonetheless, while it is the case that class relations are reproduced (and contested) somewhat differently in different education systems, the policies that I discuss in this paper have become prominent features of the educational landscape across large parts of the globe. The twin strands of standards-based reform and marketization have become the dominant forms of state intervention in schooling in Western Europe (Jones et al. 2008), North America (Apple 2001, Darling-Hammond 2004, Pandya 2011, Ravitch 2010), Australia (Klenowski & Wyatt-Smith 2012) as well as England (Ball 2007, Hatcher & Jones 2011, Torrance 2011).

These policies have, by and large, been presented as the means whereby class inequalities in education are to be addressed – and at least ameliorated. In what follows, I want to draw attention to the problems in these claims and to sketch out some features of an alternative approach to a real and long-standing problem.

In the final part of this paper, I outline aspects of this alternative, in relation to the purposes of education, the content and pedagogy of education and the part that academics and educationalists can play in winning support for such an alternative.

Are marketisation and standards-based reforms credible answers to the problem of class and education?

In the first part of this paper, I want to draw on a valuable recent literature review, commissioned by the RSA (Perry and Francis 2010). Perry and

Francis argue that there have been two dominant strands in recent government-led attempts to address the problem of social class difference in education. First, there has been the drive to raise aspirations, to address what David Blunkett, New Labour's first secretary of state for education, referred to as the 'poverty of expectation' (Blunkett 1999) and what Michael Gove, the current Conservative secretary of state, has termed 'the soft bigotry of low expectations' (Mulholland 2012). Second, there has been, in a number of different guises, the marketisation of education: what I mean by this is a series of structural changes that have, since the 1988 Education Reform Act, introduced market-like mechanisms into the relationship between schools, that have encouraged competition between schools, that have represented parents and/or school students as the consumers of the goods that schools have to offer (see, for example, Apple 2001, Ball 2007, Gee et al. 1996, Hartley 2007, Hatcher and Jones 1996, Jones 1989, Jones et al. 2008, Yandell 2001).

It is worth noting, too, the continuity in the pursuit of these policies across UK governments in the past two decades: just as New Labour's education policy marked a continuation, in most key aspects, of previous Conservative policy (Jones 2003, Lawson & Spours 2011), so the current government, for all its claims to novelty, is adopting the same means. Its flagship policy has been the massive expansion of the academies programme that was initiated by New Labour, creating a fragmented 'local market economy of schools' (Benn 2011: 163); there is the same attachment to standards-based reforms, the same focus on social mobility through individual educational attainment. (This is not to deny differences of emphasis, particularly in relation to the politics of the curriculum.) One effect of this continuity, though, has been that there has

not been any significant articulation of opposition to these policies, either within parliament or within mainstream political parties.

Insofar as marketisation and standards-based reforms can be construed as intended to address the issue of differential achievement in education, the reality is, as Perry and Francis (2010) indicate, that they have not worked. Indeed, there is a great deal of robust evidence that the introduction of market-like mechanisms into education has tended to exacerbate existing inequalities. This is a finding of the 2006 PISA analysis (OECD 2007) and of more recent research in the UK (Hills et al. 2010).

Very simply, in fragmented systems, systems constructed around the principle of consumer choice, those who are already advantaged will ensure that their advantages are consolidated and passed on to the next generation: to those that have, more shall be given. Because this is so clearly the effect of the introduction of choice as the organising principle of education provision, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that those who remain such firm advocates of the market are motivated more by an ideological commitment to the market than by any attachment to evidence-informed practice. It is worth making this observation because it has tended to be those with a commitment to equality or social justice who are represented as doctrinaire or ideologically driven: the rhetoric of the marketeers presents their interventions as merely technocratic, motivated by nothing more sinister than an interest in ‘what works’ (Barber 1996, Barber & Mourshed 2009).

The idea that choice would be the central lever in the reform of the public services was taken as axiomatic by Tony Blair:

Choice is crucial both to individual empowerment and – by enabling the consumer to move to an alternative provider where dissatisfied – to quality of service (Blair 2002: 20).

Blair's argument – an argument that marks a continuity with the Conservative-led governments that preceded and followed the period of New Labour – is that the world had moved on since the postwar settlement: in a modern, consumer-led society, the drab uniformity of provision that had once been tolerated was simply no longer good enough. This, particularly in relation to education, is both bad history and hopelessly unrealistic politics.

As an account of developments since the 1944 Education Act, Blair's version ignores the fact that there simply never was a period of uniformity in the provision of schooling: the system in the UK, and most of all in England, has always been a patchwork of different systems, with markedly different levels of resourcing, different forms of governance, different intakes and different outcomes (Benn 2011).

As a prescription for future improvement, Blair's idea is little short of risible. The model of the parent (or pupil) as consumer, free to exercise choice in the education marketplace, does not begin to acknowledge either the contingency or the complexity of such 'choices'; nor does it recognise that schooling is a much more long-term, socially and culturally embedded, practice than shopping. Blair's vision is also a profoundly individualistic one – a point to which I return below.

The second policy lever, the emphasis on raising aspirations, might seem more benign but it, too, is deeply problematic. For policy-makers, it has the intrinsic appeal of being cost-neutral. If the problem is rooted in such subjective matters as aspiration, then there is no reason to contemplate

structural change. If it is all a problem of the poverty of expectation, there is no need to consider the pervasive effects of poverty itself – the grim, grinding reality of actually-existing material poverty.

I confess that, having spent twenty years working in inner London secondary schools, I find it hard to contain my anger when politicians airily dismiss such inconvenient facts of life. I have taught children for whom the free school dinner provided the only meal of the day, children living in damp, overcrowded temporary accommodation whose living conditions had an obvious effect on their ability to get a good night's sleep, and hence on their capacity to concentrate in class, children who were stigmatised because the only clothing they possessed was their ill-fitting school uniform, children whose responsibilities as carers for family members meant that school was little more than a brief respite.

Whatever debates there might be around the ways in which the postwar welfare state conceptualised the issues - Beveridge's 'five giant evils' of want, disease, ignorance, squalor and idleness – or sought to address them (Beveridge 1942, Timmins 1996, Kynaston 2007), at least there was a recognition that these were objective realities – not some psychological inhibition that afflicted the working class and thus prevented them availing themselves of the opportunities that were presented to them.

We also need to be very clear on where responsibility for class inequality is located in the Blunkett-Gove analysis. First, it's the teachers' fault. This line is being vigorously pursued by, among others, Sir Michael Wilshaw, the current head of Ofsted, whose version of the history of London schools is one that presents teachers, prior to the accountability mechanism of Ofsted inspection, as guilty of 'blue murder':

Certainly, Ofsted was key in transforming my life as a teacher and headteacher. Our education system is much better because of greater accountability in the system. Those who think we haven't made progress need to remember what it was like before Ofsted. I certainly do. In the seventies and eighties, when I worked in places like Peckham, Bermondsey, Hackney and West Ham, whole generations of children and young people were failed.

The school where I was head before moving to Ofsted, Mossbourne Academy in Hackney, stands on the site of Hackney Downs School, which in its day represented the worst excesses of that period. But there would have been many others just as bad that never hit the headlines and got away with blue murder (Wilshaw 2012: 2).

The account is, to say the least, a partial one. We shouldn't pretend that there ever was a golden age, but there is a history of schooling in London that is worth defending, a history of real struggles and real gains. It is a history of teachers' agency in curriculum and pedagogy, a history of teachers' work in dialogue with school students and with local communities, a history of attentiveness to local circumstance and to difference. It is a history that is about teachers working together, in different kinds of groups and organisations, with a shared commitment to social justice in education. Because of this, it is a history that deserves to be remembered and celebrated – not traduced in the manner of Wilshaw's glib story.

Just as there never was a golden age of schooling, so it is undoubtedly the case that some teachers have lower expectations than they should have of some learners. Whether the current regime of standards-based reform (Darling-Hammond 2004) mitigates or exacerbates this phenomenon is an open question. To the extent that the current systems of accountability are structured around high-stakes testing and the tracking of students against

actual and predicted test scores, it is plausible, at the least, that the standards-based reforms have encouraged the very notions of fixed ability that constrain learners' and teachers' expectations (Hart et al. 2004, Fisher 2011).

The second target of the Blunkett-Gove focus on low expectations is, of course, the working class itself. The root cause of working-class underachievement is identified as being a problem in the outlook of working-class people themselves: it is predicated on a deficit model of working-class culture and values, and thus it tends to divert attention away from the structural problems of inequality in the education system itself (Perry and Francis 2010; see also Davies 2000, Rosen 1972).

Four modest proposals for an alternative approach

In the second part of this paper, I want to address this deficit model by making four very simple points about class and education; in doing so, I hope to sketch out some possibilities for an alternative approach to that which current and recent governments have adopted.

1. Social mobility is not the answer

First, the goal of social mobility – the goal championed by Gordon Brown (2008) and by Michael Gove alike – is wholly inadequate: it encourages tokenistic measures and it leaves structural inequalities unchallenged and unchanged (Nunn et al. 2007). Let me be specific here. Michael Gove is absolutely right to draw attention to the scandalous under-representation of students entitled to free school meals (the most widely-use proxy measure of poverty) at Oxford and Cambridge (Gove 2011). But doubling the number of such students admitted to the most prestigious universities would not begin to address the inequalities that

shape and define the system of schooling in this country. To elevate social mobility into a goal is fatally to neglect the much more defensible, worthwhile objective of social justice. But the attainment of social justice involves the transformation not only of schools but also of society, and it is far from clear that this has been even an aspiration for any government in the last three decades.

I should say something more about the enduring discursive power of social mobility as a (the?) goal of education policy. Melissa Benn describes political leaders as ‘persistently haunted by the grammar school narrative’ (Benn 2011: 62). The story of individual advancement through education is a very old one, implicated in Wordsworthian versions of the development of the self (Reid 2004) and in even older Protestant myths of individual betterment and/or redemption (Bunyan and Defoe, for instance – *The Pilgrim’s Progress* and *Robinson Crusoe* remaining, after the Bible, the books most commonly to be found in British working-class households throughout the nineteenth century [Rose 2002]). The grammar school narrative has retained such power precisely because it sits within a deeply-embedded way of conceptualising the individual as central to learning and development. The grammar school success story is the working-class pupil who escapes from the class into which s/he was born. It is a narrative founded on a deficit model of working class life and culture.

What this narrative does is to mythologise education as a route out of poverty. It looks like the means of defeating Beveridge’s giant of Ignorance, as Disease was to be overcome by the foundation of the NHS. This is a mythology that flies in the face of the facts. Grammar schools did precious little for social mobility. In the 1950s, that heyday of the grammar school era, most of the children of semi-skilled and unskilled

workers who managed to get into a grammar school left with fewer than three O-level passes, while only about five per cent of the children of unskilled workers who made it to grammar school emerged with two A-levels (Maclure 1969: 237). What made the difference in the the postwar period was the massive expansion of white-collar jobs; it was economic growth that created the need for higher levels of education, not education that produced the jobs. The politicians' tendency to blame education for economic stagnation, for unemployment (the unschooled, or rather those lacking appropriate credentials of schooling, held responsible for their own joblessness) and for the lack of social mobility is a case of mistaking cause for effect (Keep 2011).

2. What is education for?

This leads directly to my second point, which is that we need to re-open the debate about what education is for. The assumption shared by recent governments is that the primary purpose of education is an economic one, and hence that a system of schooling that met the needs of the economy would be an education service that was fit for purpose.

For Blair, it mattered that the sponsors of the first academies were businessmen, captains of industry, because this signalled the proper relationship between schooling and the world beyond the school gates (Yandell 2009). For Brown (2008) and Gove (2009) alike, the preoccupation with creating a “world class education system” is, at heart, an economic imperative. It is the aspiration that through education the nation's economic competitiveness (and greatness) might be restored. It harks back to the words with which Forster introduced the 1870 Education Bill to parliament:

Upon the speedy provision of elementary education depends our industrial prosperity. It is of no use trying to give technical teaching to our artisans without elementary education; uneducated labourers – and many of our labourers are utterly uneducated – are, for the most part, unskilled labourers, and if we leave our work-folk any longer unskilled, notwithstanding their strong sinews and determined energy, they will become over-matched in the competition of the world (Maclure 1969: 104).

There is a long-running debate about whether the assumptions on which such claims rest are justified – whether the causal relationship between educational standards and economic development is as strong as is assumed (Robinson 1999). In the boom years of New Labour, it was easy to assume a direct correlation between rising educational standards and economic prosperity, for the individual and for society at large. In the current period of recession and mass unemployment, youth unemployment in particular, such assumptions look somewhat tendentious. The economic rationale no longer works either at the level of policy or as a means to motivate young people to invest time and energy in their education (Allen and Ainley 2012).

What has been neglected is the possibility of other, less instrumental rationales for schooling. The privileging of economic arguments has marginalised the case for the intrinsic value of education – education as social and cultural process that is valid in its own right, that is an index of a developed, humane, ethical society, and that provides opportunities for the development of personhood that do not need extrinsic justifications (Pring 2012). Of course, such goods need to be paid for – but the state funding of high-quality education is always a question of values, the values that a society attaches to different activities; it is never merely a question of economics.

3. Pedagogic relations and the content of education

Third, in relation to the content of education, we need to reconsider questions of knowledge, culture and value: whose knowledge, whose culture is valorised within the processes of schooling? This is where I would want to suggest that the simple binary opposition of child-centred education, on the one hand, and, on the other, some conception of knowledge, or facts (Gradgrind's or Gove's), or even an attachment to the disciplines as some sort of Platonic entities, just will not do. This issue has a political and a pedagogic dimension.

The political aspect can be stated simply, though its implications are more complicated and far-reaching: it is that the lives, histories, cultures, languages and beliefs of our students, and of their families and communities, are to be taken seriously. So, for example, telling school students that they are not allowed to use their first language in the classroom is disrespectful of those students' linguistic expertise and indeed of their identities. Likewise, the question of Standard English is much more complicated than the new (2012) version of the *Teachers' Standards* might suggest. There, the injunction is laid on teachers to:

take responsibility for promoting high standards of literacy, articulacy and the correct use of standard English, whatever the teacher's specialist subject (DfE 2012: 6).

The assumptions here are first that 'high standards of ... articulacy' are coterminous with 'the correct use of standard English', and then that Standard English is unproblematic. Neither of these assumptions is tenable linguistically or culturally. There is no recognition here that Standard English is itself contested and variable, still less that it is a class dialect (Williams 1961/1965). To recognise this is not to deny that

Standard English is a language of power, but it is to acknowledge that different people stand in a different relation to it.

The pedagogic aspect is that as teachers we need to find out about, and make use of, what students bring with them to the classroom – what Luis Moll has called their ‘funds of knowledge’ (Moll 2000). What I am gesturing at here is an understanding of the learning process that derives from the work of the great Soviet psychologist, Lev Vygotsky. Vygotsky argued for the need to see a dialectical relationship between the everyday (or spontaneous) knowledge that learners bring with them to the classroom and the organised, ‘scientific’ bodies of knowledge that they encounter in and through education (Vygotsky 1987, Yandell 2010).

This means adopting forms of pedagogy that enable learners to start from, and make full use of, what they already know, rather than treating them as empty vessels, needing only to be replenished from teacherly founts of knowledge. There are clear connections between the model of education that I am advocating here and the work of Paulo Freire (1972), particularly in his rejection of a ‘banking’ model of education and his argument for the liberatory potential of a dialogic model, in which teachers and students collaborate in the investigation of problems in the world beyond the classroom.

My argument, then, is not for some soft, cuddly, undemanding version of education that makes life easy for the learners. On the contrary, it is a model that is challenging for teachers and learners alike. It means accepting that scientific knowledge, the codified knowledge of the academic disciplines, should be interrogated, challenged and modified by the learners. Such a view of education situates learning – all learning – in culture and in history.

4. Conference papers and political activity

This leads me towards my fourth and last point, an observation that takes us beyond the conference hall and the academic paper. We need to recognise that education, and particularly education provided for the benefit of working-class students, is under threat as never before. It is threatened by the privatisation of universities, by the increase in tuition fees, by the abolition of the Education Maintenance Allowance, by the fragmentation and stratification of schooling, as well as by the wider attack on the welfare state. Michael Gove may profess an attachment to social mobility, but actions speak louder than words.

What Gove's actions as Secretary of State have amounted to is a consistent, ruthless rationing of education. That is what happened last summer, when thousands of sixteen-year-olds were denied access to further study because of an arbitrary decision to raise the grade thresholds – and working-class and minority ethnic students were disproportionately disadvantaged by this decision (Stewart 2012). That is what has happened, as a consequence of the raising of tuition fees, in the decrease in numbers of students applying for university places (Baker 2012).

In such circumstances, it is important that we use conferences and academic papers to develop analyses and arguments, but it is even more important that we understand that as workers we are also part of the wider labour and trade union movement. So we need to play an active part in our movement's defence of the gains of the last century, by being prepared to march alongside our students and alongside other trade unionists.

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