Achieving socially just education

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This briefing note outlines how both the testing regime and the segregation of children into different sets or streams increase failure and disadvantage rather than raising standards and ‘closing the gap’. It then deals with related issues such as curriculum, school choice, the private school sector and the diversity of types of school.

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. Yet, current education policy has intensified educational cruelties in schooling. There are many examples but my research has focussed on two in particular.

First, testing regimes in primary schools. In an article called “I’ll be a nothing” (1) I have shown that assessment procedures have powerful effects on how students come to see themselves as learners (2). It also reveals the emotional consequences – of anxiety and discomfort – for children, and highlights the paradox of contemporary English assessment regimes, that, while the stated aim is to raise the achievement of all children, one consequence is the fixing of failure in the working classes. Although children expressed anxieties across class differences, it was primarily black and white working-class girls agonising that they would be ‘a nothing’. And the risks of finding they have very little value in education are disproportionately high for such working-class girls.

The second area is that of setting and streaming, and in particular, the symbolic violence enacted on those in the bottom sets. The growing emphasis on competition between schools based on test results has encouraged both setting practices and ‘game playing’. Such practices have been growing exponentially across the state sector over the last decade, and are now endemic in primary as well as secondary schools. At the secondary stage they result in white middle class children in socially mixed schools (3) being mostly educated separately in top sets away from their black and white working-class peers. They also fix failure in the working classes (2) who are disproportionately allocated to the bottom sets (4). This is an extremely perverse form of the fair chance and fair play for all that is traditionally viewed as underpinning our educational system.

Classrooms need to be transformed from the stressful, task-driven, target-led overly competitive environments they are currently. And while the 3Rs are important, teaching children to be caring, respectful, cooperative, knowledgeable about their own and others’ histories, and well informed about contemporary global issues are 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’ that encourage student to question, as well as develop social and political awareness. A revalorizing of vocational and working class knowledges and a broadening out of what constitutes educational success beyond the narrowly academic is long overdue.
However, social justice for children and young people is not just an issue of what is happening in classrooms. All the major political parties valorize choice without recognizing that choices come with resources (5) that remain very unequally distributed (6). Parental choice has become the main policy that the middle and upper classes have successfully mobilized in their strategy of keeping ahead. One consequence of a choice-based system is that the working classes have largely ended up with the educational ‘choices’ that the middle classes do not want (7).

A socially just educational system would require a very different structure to the existing one with a much flatter hierarchy of schooling. Currently over 15% of British school educational spending goes on the 7% of pupils who are privately educated (8). Any commitment to social justice is fundamentally undermined by structures, such as private schools, that perpetuate advantage. However, current policy is privatizing the state system from the inside out. Private schools are just the tip of an iceberg of privatization as increasing numbers of schools, from church schools to academies and free schools enjoy some form of separation from the mainstream state sector while continuing to derive large parts of their income from the state. These would need to be replaced by a truly comprehensive system where the differences between schools are minimized, while the diversity within them is maximized. With the abolition of the existing inequitable diversity of types of schools, all with their different funding mechanisms and selection requirements, there could be a renewed focus on achieving a social mix within schools that is underpinned by social mixing. Our current highly competitive, hierarchical and fragmented educational system could then be replaced with a collegial system founded on collaboration and mutual support between schools.

References


(3) Diane Reay, Gill Crozier and David James (2011) White middle-class identities and urban schooling


(8) PISA 2009: Key Findings (OECD)