

# Think Piece

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What would a socially just education system look like?

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# Executive Summary

The appropriation of 'social justice' by the Right has seen the idea of social injustices in education increasingly regarded as the responsibility of the individuals suffering the injustice rather than the collective responsibility of society. 'Social justice', 'choice' and 'diversity', whilst sounding progressive, positive and beneficial, have worked discursively to sanction and exacerbate inequalities and have been part of a growing trend in the privatization and marketisation of education. But research shows 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.

Social class is arguably the one area of educational inequality that has not been addressed in Britain. Yet educational inequalities are inextricably bound up with social inequalities and cannot be addressed in isolation from them. In order to have a more socially just educational system the wider social context needs to look very different, and, in particular, the gap between the rich and the poor needs to be substantially reduced.

The current policy status quo is one that valorizes choice whilst rarely recognizing that choices come with resources that remain very unequally distributed. However the vast majority of people do not want to run their children's schools - they just want their children to have a good education that realizes their potential.

What we need are totally different ways of envisioning education. Part of that process requires a revaluing of vocational and working class knowledges and a broadening out of what constitutes educational success beyond the narrowly academic. Much also needs to be done inside schools and classrooms to change the culture from the stressful, task-driven, target-led, overly competitive environments they currently are.

Tinkering with an unjust educational system is not going to transform it into a just system. The building blocks of a socially just educational system lie outside in wider society, but before any building can be done the right foundations must be laid. This paper outlines some of the ideas behind what it may take to achieve a socially just education system.

This ThinkPiece is a shortened version of an article 'What would a socially just education system look like?: saving the minnows from the pike' to be published in a special issue of the Journal of Education Policy on Socially Just Education in Winter 2012.

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# Introduction

My concern in this paper is to focus on the one area of educational inequality that has never been addressed in Britain. Even the Inner London Education Authority, the bastion of Equal Opportunities in Education throughout the 1970 and 1980s, never managed to produce guidelines on social class to accompany its impressive documents on race and gender (ILEA 1985;1986). Social class is also the one aspect of inequality that has been marginalized in the contemporary focus on diversity within education.

Further complicating any project of constructing a socially just educational system has been the appropriation of the term 'social justice' by the political Right in the UK. Since the 1980s they have engaged in an ideological project in which the terms 'equality' and 'social justice' have become shadows of what they were seen to constitute for those on the Left in the 1960s and 70s. As a result, in the 2010s neoliberal thinking, despite its massive failures economically, appears to have tightened its grip on political, and beyond that wider commonsense, discourses (Clegg 2010). As a consequence social injustices in education and their remediation are increasingly seen to be the responsibility of the individual suffering the injustice rather than the collective responsibility of society. The contemporary vision of a socially just educational system has become the dystopian vision of the Right in which the economic ends of education are transcendent and competitive individualism is seen to be a virtue (See Michael Gove's recent speeches Gove 2011a; 2011b).

The current status quo in terms of delineating a socially just educational system, places those with more collectivist, egalitarian philosophies in a painful position. It is difficult for those genuinely committed to greater social justice in education to reconcile equality with elitism, fairness with rigid hierarchies, as our current government does. But I would argue that it is futile to wrestle with the current neoliberal terms of engagement, to try and make them 'better'. Tinkering with an unjust educational system is not going to transform it into a just system. What we need are totally different ways of envisioning education, ones that enable a move beyond narrow secular self-interests and economic ends to envisage policies and

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practices that are socially just, not in an instrumental neoliberal sense but in terms of more egalitarian social democratic and socialist traditions.

Here, the political philosophy of R H Tawney, writing in the first half of the 20th century, is a useful antidote to contemporary neoliberal individualism. Tawney labelled practices of 'getting the best for your own child' as 'antisocial egotism' (Tawney 1943). Also, for Tawney, a vision of a socially just educational system should be much bolder and brighter than a focus on social mobility which he dismisses as 'merely converting into doctors, barristers and professors a certain number of people who would otherwise have been manual workers' (Tawney 1964b: 77). Rather, a socially just educational system is one in which education is seen as an end in itself, a space that 'people seek out not in order that they may become something else but because they are what they are' (pg 78), rather than a means of getting ahead of others, of stealing a competitive edge.

Instead, Tawney put the case for a common school asserting that 'the English educational system will never be one worthy of a civilised society until the children of all classes in the nation attend the same schools' (Tawney 1964a: 144). So, in Tawney's terms a socially just educational system is one in which a nation secures educationally for all children 'what a wise parent would desire for his own children' (Tawney 1964a: 146). In a contemporary educational landscape, characterized by a steeply unequal hierarchy of educational provision, and surrounded by growing economic inequalities that translate into hugely inequitable educational opportunities, we are still miles away from realizing either Tawney's common culture or his common school. In the next section I turn to the contemporary situation and explore how a currently unjust educational system might become a just one.

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# What would a socially just education system look like?

Currently 23% of British school educational spending goes on the 7% of pupils who are privately educated (OECD 2009). But over and above such an inequitable distribution of resources, private schools have been one of the principal means by which elitism and social divisions are produced and perpetuated in England so the first step towards a socially just educational system would be to abolish them. Any commitment to social justice is fundamentally undermined by structures, such as private schools, that perpetuate advantage. A further beneficial consequence of their abolition would be that our political and wider social elites would have a much stronger commitment to the resourcing and improvement of state schools if their children attended them.

However, the abolition of private schools would not promote greater social justice if the hierarchy and elitism they exacerbate is replicated in the state system. So alongside private schools, faith, foundation, trust schools, academies and free schools 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. This would be in direct contrast to the current system where endemic setting and streaming means white middle class children in socially mixed schools are mostly educated separately in top sets away from their black and white working class peers (Reay et al. 2011). Furthermore, there is evidence from the Nordic countries that shows that the abolition of setting and streaming is not only more educationally just in terms of treating students as academic equals, it also significantly increases social mobility (Pekkarinen et al. 2006).

It is not just the neoliberal rhetoric around diversity that has worked to bury social class as a crucial axis of educational inequality whilst sanctioning an increasingly divisive and segregated system, the current discursive and policy status quo is one that valorizes choice whilst rarely recognizing that choices come with resources that remain very unequally distributed (Reay 2001). Parental choice has become the main policy that the middle and upper classes have very successfully mobilized in

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their strategy of keeping ahead. As a consequence the increasing emphasis on parental choice has had a particularly invidious impact on educational inequalities. Although choice has become a popular buzzword in education, the working classes predominantly constitute those people who are not able to exercise 'choice'. This is because they get 'crowded out' of the best areas in which to send their children to school (because they can't afford a house in 'good' catchment areas) or because they do not have the knowledge to fully understand or the resources to make the best use of information about schools. One consequence of a choice-based system is that the working class have largely ended up with the 'choices' that the middle class do not want to make (Reay 2006).

So similarly to 'social justice' choice and diversity have been well and truly 'neoliberalised'. The terms, whilst sounding progressive, positive and beneficial, have worked discursively to sanction and exacerbate inequalities; part of a growing privatization and marketisation of education. In contrast, the educational system needs to work with new, socially just conceptions of choice and diversity, in effect a move away from the contemporary notion of choice, which view choices as both decontextualised and disembodied, to understandings that recognize choices as powerfully determined by the amount and type of resources individuals can bring to their decision-making. Similarly, current understandings of educational diversity which have primarily been preoccupied with the creation of a strongly hierarchised diversity of school provision need to be replaced with a concern with intra-school and classroom diversity so that possibilities for social mixing are enhanced. At the same time the current highly competitive, hierarchical and fragmented educational system should be replaced with a collegial system founded on collaboration and mutual support between schools.

But much needs to be done inside schools and classrooms, as well as working on the structure of the educational system. Classrooms would have to operate very differently 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

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pedagogies' 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.

Educational inequalities are inextricably bound up with social inequalities and cannot be addressed in isolation from them. A crucial question is the extent to which a socially just educational system is possible in an unjust society given the degree to which educational systems reflect the societies they grow out of. Most of the contemporary debate on making the educational system more equitable focuses on social mobility. But social mobility is a red herring. Currently we don't have it – or very little of it (Causa and Johansson 2009; OECD 2010). And the focus on social mobility neglects the fact that given the current high levels of inequality, social mobility is primarily about recycling inequality rather than tackling it. So in order to have a more socially just educational system the wider social context needs to look very different, and, in particular, the gap between the rich and the poor needs to be substantially reduced. There is a desperate need for basic systemic interventions at the level of the economy. Minimum pay should be raised and a cap placed on top pay, and in particular bonuses to the already overpaid. Anyone seriously committed to ensuring a socially just education system would introduce a wealth tax, and begin the process of decreasing the ratio of top pay levels to average pay from its current level of 480 to 1 to something approaching 50 to 1 so that the underlying economic and social conditions are more conducive to generating a socially just educational system. The main way to develop a more socially just educational system is to have a more equal society (Wilkinson and Pickett 2009).

The building blocks of a socially just educational system lie outside in wider society, but before any building can be done the right foundations need to be established, and at present they are extremely shaky. Globally, the policy imperatives and dominant discourses governing powerful external agencies such as the OECD and the IMF need to be transformed in order to prioritise equity goals over those of

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economy, efficiency and competition (drivers that all operate currently to increase educational inequalities both globally across nations and internally within them). There are myriad hurdles in the way of a socially just educational system, but the major barriers to an educational system that works for all of society in the 21st century lie as much in wider society and the economy as in the educational system.

First, while there has been a shift in attitudes towards the working classes, they are still powerfully influenced by understandings of class as cultural. Now the elites' view of the working classes as an unruly undisciplined mass has been transformed into a view of the working classes as made up of individuals who need to take more responsibility for their lives. Their view is that class position and poverty are lifestyle choices: that anyone who wants to be, and tries hard enough, can be middle class. Changing such views is a vital precursor to a socially just educational system.

The second intractable area is the economy, and a stalling in the creation of middle class jobs. So instead of the myth of an endlessly expanding middle class we have the reality of a still significant and large working class cohort within the labour market. Rather, than education policy that focuses on social mobility and raising working class aspirations in the narrow sense of becoming middle class, what is required is an educational approach that values vocational routes and careers, and the existing knowledges of working class young people. Another potential and related economic factor is the growing relative poverty of the working class. Economic inequality in Britain has risen relentlessly over the past twenty five years fuelled by a redistribution from wages to profits in GDP (Jansson 2008). By 2007 Britain had higher income inequality than all bar 5 of the EU 25 countries. John Hills' (2010) LSE report states that the richest 10% in Britain are now more than 100 times better off than the bottom 10%. And all the historical evidence indicates that recessions and economic downturns impact more negatively on the working than the middle classes. So a concern is that the next decade will see a deterioration in working class opportunities in education as economic inequalities increase.

A socially just educational system would both recognize and take cognizance of these economic realities. Rather than continuing with the unremitting focus on social mobility and raising aspirations, an ideological whip with which to beat the working classes, it would value and respect working class as well as middle and upper class ways of knowing where the vocational has esteem alongside the

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academic, rather than being perceived to be an inferior form of knowledge. It should be premised on the maxim that a good education is the democratic right of all rather than a prize to be competitively fought over.

Yet, 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. The vast majority also do not want to run their children's schools. They just want them to have a good education that realizes their potential. And what most British would define as a good education, both in the sense of academic achievement and children's wellbeing, is much more widely available in Finland than it is here. See Figure 1 below for an overview of the Finnish educational system.

## Finland:

### The closest example of a socially just educational system

In Finland over 40% of children from poor homes exceed expectations<sup>1</sup>. Yet, Finland has comprehensive schools that do not set or stream pupils, and a society in which teachers are seen as valued experts<sup>2</sup>. It also has no inspection system, national tests or league tables<sup>3</sup>. Rather, tests are used only for diagnosis and improvement<sup>4</sup>. Finnish educational reform principles rely on building professional responsibility within schools and encouraging collaboration between them, rather than applying external accountability structures and testing regimes<sup>5</sup>. Furthermore, schools are credited and teachers recognized for their innovative ideas, creativity and initiatives<sup>6</sup>. At the same time it has far higher levels of literacy and numeracy than the UK. In four international surveys, all since 2000, Finnish comprehensive school students have scored above students in all the other participating countries in science and problem-solving skills, and came either first or second in reading and mathematics<sup>7</sup>. These results were achieved despite the amount of homework assigned in Finnish schools being relatively low and an absence of private tuition<sup>8</sup>.

There is also virtually no private school sector in Finland (only 2% of the total), and where private schools do exist it is because they are specialist, for example, Steiner schools, and a very small number of Christian schools, but importantly, they are predominantly state funded, meaning all children have access to them. In 2002 99.2% of primary and secondary educational expenditure was publicly financed<sup>9</sup>. A

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possible blot on this comprehensive landscape is the large amount of what is termed 'part-time special education', catering for nearly 30% of Finnish students. However, the aim of such provision is that of keeping every student in the same school system<sup>10</sup>.

The key underlying philosophy shaping Finnish education is that the school system should offer equal educational opportunities to everyone irrespective of locality, gender, financial situation or linguistic and cultural background. A system in which virtually all children enroll in identical comprehensive schools regardless of their class background or personal abilities and characteristics has resulted in schools and classrooms that are heterogeneous in terms of pupil differences and diverse in terms of educational needs and expectations<sup>11</sup>. Yet, at the same time schools are very similar in pupil profile to each other. The difference between schools is minuscule compared to the UK. It is this parity of value and esteem across schools that has led to a culture of educational inclusivity that is absent in our own increasingly hierarchical and segregated system.

In Finland deeply entrenched systems of social democracy have more enduring leverage than they do in the UK. Also there is less social distance between individuals in different socio-economic positions, social class differences are less stark and count less than in the UK context. Part of that is because they are a more homogeneous and less hierarchical society (only 3% are from ethnic minorities and they do not have either a monarchy or an aristocracy). The Finns have managed to create an educational system where the commonalities among students are emphasized and the differences downplayed.

<sup>1</sup> Shepherd 2010, <sup>2</sup> Laukkanen 2008, <sup>3</sup> Field et al 2007, <sup>4</sup> Grubb 2007, <sup>5</sup> Itkonen and Jahnukainen 2007, <sup>6</sup> Sahlberg 2010, <sup>7</sup> OECD 2010, <sup>8</sup> Sahlberg 2007, <sup>9</sup> OECD 2005, <sup>10</sup> Kivirauma and Ruoho 2007, <sup>11</sup> Valljarvi 2003.

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# Conclusion: From Radical Pasts to Radical Futures

There is a damaging 'poverty of aspiration' in Britain that lies not in the working classes but among our political elites. Yet what UK society needs, more than anything else in the contemporary moment, is greater equality and less social and economic distance between its citizens; a rethinking and reworking of Tawney's educational thinking for the 21st century. Such a reworking would require a reclaiming of 'the common good' (Tawney 1964a), the belief in education as an end in itself, and a much stronger, ethically informed critique of capitalism, both within and beyond the educational system. A hundred years ago in 1914 Tawney (1964b:76) wrote:

**That division of mankind (sic) into those who are ends and those who are means, whether made by slaveholders, or by capitalists, is the ultimate and unforgivable wrong, with which there can be truce neither in education nor in any other department of social life.**

Currently, the Finns are moving towards the UK model of education, introducing more choice and competition into their education system. There certainly should be more judicious policy borrowing across nations but this is moving in the wrong direction. Rather, we should be borrowing from the Finns then we would have both a more efficient education system in terms of academic outcomes, and a more socially just one.

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