

Caroline Benn Memorial Lecture 2011

Comprehensive schooling in the 21st century: getting the best education for everyone

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This talk draws on the radical insights of RH Tawney's egalitarian philosophy and Caroline Benn's socialist educational vision to map out the possibilities for truly comprehensive education in the 21st century and discuss ways of overcoming existing barriers. In 1934 R H Tawney wrote:

I should be lacking in candour if I did not state my conviction that the only basis of educational policy worthy of a civilised nation is one which accepts as its objective, unpopular though such a view is in England, the establishment of the completest possible educational equality and that it is the duty of such educationalists as agree with that view to make it clear by definite, explicit and repeated statements that that and nothing less is what they mean.(Tawney 1934: 1)

In 21st century Britain we have moved a very long way from the principles, policies and practices Tawney was advocating. The establishment of the completest possible educational equality is no nearer to realization now than it was then. In his seminal text 'Equality' Tawney argued against the view that was dominant in England at the time, that liberty and equality are antithetical. Rather he asserted inequalities, and in particular economic inequalities, were a major threat to liberty. For Tawney the liberty of the working classes depended on the restraint of the middle and upper classes. He quotes A F Pollard (1920: 183) "Every man (sic) should have this liberty and no more, to do unto others as he would that they should do unto him; upon that common foundation rest liberty, equality and morality". The socially just society is one that can call itself a community rather than being comprised of competing fractions with very unequal distributions of social and economic power. Such communal societies are based on a common culture because, as Tawney points out, a community without a common culture is not a community at all:

Social well-being depends upon cohesion and solidarity. It implies the existence, not merely of opportunities to ascend, but of a high level of general culture, and a strong sense of common interests, and diffusion throughout society of a conviction that civilization is not the business of an elite alone, but a common enterprise which is the concern of all. And individual happiness does not only require that men (sic) should be free to rise to new positions of comfort and distinction; it also requires that they should be able to lead a life of dignity and culture, whether they rise or not (Tawney 1964a: 108)

'The good society' was one that resolutely pursued the elimination of all forms of special privilege, including those of education. According to Tawney, the price of a socially unjust educational system, underpinned by a tradition of inequality, was servility and resentment on the one side and arrogance and patronage on the other (Tawney 1964a). It is unsurprising then that Tawney advocated for an educational system 'unimpeded by the vulgar irrelevancies of class and income' (Tawney 1943) and argued for universal university education on the basis that it is just as important for those who remain working class all their lives as it is for the upper and middle classes (Tawney 1964a). Despite himself attending a private school, throughout his life Tawney denounced private schooling arguing that:

The effect of the division of schools into free and fee-paying is to create a mistaken impression

that the latter are in some sense superior, and thus to encourage a social snobbery which it should be one of the functions of education to discredit (Tawney 1942: 4)

Tawney abhorred practices of ‘getting the best for your own child’ if it was at the expense of other people’s children, labeling such practices as ‘antisocial egotism’ (Tawney 1943). Also, for Tawney, a vision of a socially just educational system should be much bolder and brighter than simply a focus on social mobility which he dismissed 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). Caroline Benn’s educational philosophy of the 60s, 70s and 80s also had a strong egalitarian flavour. As she argued passionately in 1983:

‘we must transcend narrow self interest or we are lost; we all have a contribution to make to the common good’

And as with Tawney for Caroline Benn ‘the common good’ meant establishing a strong sense of common interests, and a common educational enterprise which is the concern of all, and for both the common school was central to the good society. As Caroline and Clyde Chitty wrote in 1996:

What needs reviving most is the idea of a public education service – a service that is there to serve society as a whole, under the control of society as a whole rather than a segregated host of institutions driven by the market and the forces of privatization, which inevitably means domination by special interest groups and dictation by central government. Publicly funded education is a collective, community task – not a series of individual private races. It is about developing the widest range of human potential through a democratically accountable system.

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 (Dorling 2010), we are still miles away from realizing either Tawney or Caroline Benn’s common good or the common school that underpins it.

A socially just educational system would require a very different structure to the existing one with a much flatter hierarchy of schooling, but first and foremost it requires the abolition of the private schools. Currently 23% of British school educational spending goes on the 7% of pupils who are privately educated (OECD 2009). We spend more on our private school system than any other country except Chile. 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. Any commitment to comprehensive schooling is fundamentally undermined by structures, such as private schools, that perpetuate advantage and segregated schooling. 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, private schools are the tip of an iceberg of educational privilege which covers a range of schools which enjoy some form of separation from the mainstream state sector while continuing to derive large parts (if not all) of their income from the public purse. From church schools to city academies to the new free schools, what is referred to as the ‘grant maintained sector’ effectively imposes restrictions on entry, selecting pupils with characteristics that they regard as desirable. The existence of a selective grant maintained sector alongside an open state sector completely undermines comprehensivisation, and is hard to reconcile with the principles of social justice.

The abolition of private schools would not promote greater social justice if the hierarchy and elitism they exacerbate is replicated in the state system. Currently, we have an increasingly divided and

divisive state educational system. Most current understandings of democracy promote formal equality in the image of an educational level playing field. However, this is the equivalent of flattening the field of bumps before a small neighborhood team takes on a professional one. The formal equality that governs the educational system is rampantly unjust and becoming more so, propelled by the fantasy of choice. The word 'choice' should be prefixed by the word 'unfair' because that is exactly what a system of choice in education is – choice for those with resources equals lack of choice for those without them. The consequence of our current choice system in education is that the working classes are left with the choices the middle classes don't want to make.

Unsurprisingly, in the UK social mobility has ground to a halt. 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.

It is clear from what I have argued so far that we no longer have in the UK education that resembles, even in part, a comprehensive school system. All this sounds very depressing so where and in what should we take heart?

In his fictional satire *The Rise of the Meritocracy* Michael Young writes of an historical process in which comprehensivisation withered over the late 20th and early 21st century. History proved very different, in fact, the momentum behind the introduction of comprehensive schooling proved so strong that even Margaret Thatcher as Secretary of State was unable to resist it. It's the impulses, desires, hopes and aspirations that fuelled that momentum that we need to re-engage with and nurture. Even in neo-liberal times like the present, 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.

I have recently written about the one country that has a truly comprehensive school system. I argue that in Finland, where virtually all children enrol in identical schools, regardless of class background or personal abilities and characteristics, schools and classrooms are heterogeneous in terms of pupil differences

And diverse in terms of educational needs and expectations. It is to Finland we need to turn to find the closest example of common schools working in the service of a common culture. While in the UK just 24 per cent of students do better than expected given their background, in Finland over 40 per cent of children from poor homes exceed expectations (Shepherd 2010). Yet, Finland has truly comprehensive schools that do not set or stream pupils, and a society in which teachers are seen as valued experts (Laukkanen 2008). It also has no inspection system, national tests or league tables (Field et al 2007; Vasagar 2010). Finland has explicitly rejected the naming and shaming that goes on in British schooling. Rather, tests are used only for diagnosis and improvement (Grubb 2007). As Sahlberg (2009) points out, Finnish educational reform principles since the early 1990s have relied on building professional responsibility within schools and encouraging collaboration between them, rather than applying external accountability structures and testing regimes. Furthermore, schools are credited and teachers recognized for their innovative ideas, creativity and initiatives (Sahlberg 2010). 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 (Halinen and Jarvinen 2008; OECD 2010). These results were achieved despite the amount of homework assigned in Finnish schools being relatively low and an absence of private tuition (Sahlberg 2007). There is also virtually no private school sector in Finland (only 2 percent 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.

Wider social attitudes also differ significantly from those in the UK. Research shows that Finns feel

strongly about equality in society and in general do not support the tenets of market orientated schooling and ideologies of competition and giftedness (Andrain and Smith 2006; Wilkinson and Pickett 2007; Niemelä 2008). 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 that are very similar in pupil profile to each other. The difference between schools is minuscule compared to countries like the UK and the US. 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.

So sadly it is in Nordic countries like Finland that we must turn to find the inheritors of Tawney's common schools and Caroline Benn's truly comprehensive system. It is there rather than in the UK that there is a political consensus that children should be educated together in a common school system (OECD 2010). Yet, to reiterate an earlier point, educational systems reflect the societies they are part of, and have very different historical foundations that continue to influence the present. As a result, in Finland deeply entrenched systems of social democracy have more enduring leverage than they do in the UK (Goodson 2010). 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. And, of course, 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). In the UK class seeps into the soul creating divisions between people that are not nearly as pronounced in the Finnish context. That is why the Finns have managed to create an educational system where the commonalities among students are emphasized and the differences downplayed. And that is the ethical conundrum.

To what extent is a highly individualized, class saturated, strongly neoliberal country like the United Kingdom able to set up a comprehensive school system in which schools share parity of esteem. In the past, almost immediately a hierarchy of worth and esteem was established and continues to be established, undermining the comprehensive principle. The great unspoken, rarely admitted, is that in the United Kingdom the activities and practices associated with the working classes have automatically been assigned a lower value and deemed to be inferior (Skeggs, 2004). This is a question of hearts and minds as much as it is pedagogy and educational policy.

As a result to achieve real comprehensive schooling, in the sense of creating a system where differences become relatively unimportant because there are not enormous inequalities between people and where the emphasis is on what students share, would be a massive undertaking in the UK context. It is not merely a question of totally rethinking and overhauling an increasingly unequal hierarchical educational system but more important, of changing the national psyche. And despite all the differences among the British what we appear to share across class, gender, and ethnicity is a deeply troubling propensity to tolerate intolerable levels of economic inequalities and the educational injustices they give rise to. In contrast, schooling for genuine democracy would recognise and address cultural and social inequalities among students and takes a central role in creating "a society permeated by mutual regard of all citizens for all other citizens" (Dewey, 1916/2001, p. 311). It would require an emphasis on developing cooperative citizens not competitive individuals and a focus on educating for togetherness not for social separation.

This is a major challenge for the left but one we should seize. For too long the right has dominated educational as well as more general political thinking by thinking the unthinkable. And they are still dishing up an unsavory concoction of unpalatably elitist, unjust policies which position education as a commodity, pander to the acquisitiveness of the privileged, and position those lacking in material and cultural resources as deficient. We only have to look around us to see the consequences of lazy right wing thinking that is overwhelmingly selfish and self-interested. It is increasingly on the left that we must look for solutions that are both intellectually and morally sound, and caring and empathetic. Just as the Black papers of the 1960s and 70s thought the unthinkable and radically changed the educational landscape now we on the left need to propose policies and practices that run powerfully counter to mainstream neo-liberal thinking – and when could be a better time than when capitalism is imploding, and its rapaciousness damaging more and more people's lives. Together we need to build a new ethical

and moral framework for the 21st century that allows people to become more comfortable and at ease in the society they live in - one that centres care and concern, empathy and solidarities across differences. And there is plenty of contemporary evidence of the damage reeked by competitive individualism on school children and the pressing need to re-centre care and empathy. In UNICEF's recent report on those aspects of children's well-being attributable to how well they are served by their national educational systems the UK languished near the bottom with an overall score of 90 well below the average for the 24 countries surveyed. So, for example, the proportion of young people not looking beyond low skilled work is more than 35%. Even more concerning only slightly more than 40% found their peers kind and helpful in contrast to most other European countries, including Finland, Norway, Denmark and Sweden, where over 70% found their peers kind and helpful. Less than 20% of UK pupils like school a lot. Just as concerning, in relation to self-harming and risk behaviours, the UK languishes at the very bottom of the rankings by a considerable distance. Overall, the report concludes that, in terms of both children's subjective sense of well-being and objective criteria, the UK is markedly below the average. We are seeing the lowest levels of children's well-being in the UK in decades. As the 2010 Ipsos/Mori research, which investigated the underlying processes driving low well-being in the UK, concluded, children are less happy and satisfied with their lives than children in a majority of other countries because of the far higher levels of materialism accompanied by intense competitiveness and individualism to be found in contemporary British society.

We are currently living in an historical moment scarred by the expenses scandal, the bankers' greed, and the urban riots, a period when the Right's project of acquisitive accumulation for the already rich, and a barely existing trickle down for the rest of us, is tearing the fabric of British society apart and damaging children's wellbeing. The time has never been more opportune to refashion and revitalize the Left. Such a project would not be one of trying to seize an elusive middle ground that constantly veers to the right as New Labour has been wasting its time doing. Rather it should be one of rebuilding community and solidarity in the very place the Right, with its neo-liberal doctrines, has been hollowing out – the public sphere. And I would argue that the visions of both RH Tawney and Caroline Benn are central. It is in our schools we need to replant the seedbed of social democracy, and conceptions of community that are much more expansive and inclusive than those of 'the extended family' or 'people like us'.

On one level it has been really inspiring looking back to Tawney and Benn for glimpses of a socially just future, but on another level it has been dispiriting to find little in the way of blueprints for socially just education or radical egalitarian thinking among any of our mainstream political parties. In particular, their pallid and insipid versions of educational social justice offered do not constitute social justice at all, but rather a watered down version of the elitism and 'racism of intelligence' (Bourdieu 1998) that infuses most of the system. And while the aberrant version of what comprehensive schooling should constitute is more muted among politicians of the left than those of the right it is still an aberration. There is a damaging 'poverty of aspiration' in Britain that lies not in the working classes but among our political elites. And is a reflection of their insularity and narrowness. Yet what UK society needs, more than anything else in the contemporary moment, is schooling that reduces the social and economic distance between its citizens. A hundred years ago 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.

Contemporary British education is a web of such petty truces; a host of compromises and concessions to the power of the upper and middle classes. But, as Tawney pointed out, no class is good enough to do its thinking for another. This is especially so in the current context where our ruling elite have no knowledge of and little interest in what that other actually thinks. In the 2010s there is a greater need than ever for truly comprehensive schooling to combat the bigotry, prejudice and ignorance of the other that inevitably results from segregated and polarised schooling. Comprehensive schooling is also key to revitalising the belief in education as an end in itself, and contributing to a much stronger, ethically informed critique of inequalities in society.

If we are to build a fair and good society we need comprehensive schooling more than ever.

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