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The system should fit the individual – not vice versa

An end to neoliberalism's deceit and moral cowardice is what will transform working-class prospects, not a cheap focus on social mobility, argues **Diane Reay**

IF SOCIAL mobility is the answer, we are asking the wrong questions. Social mobility has always been about moving up a small number of working-class high achievers. It is "merely converting into doctors, barristers and professors a certain number of people who would otherwise have been manual workers", as RH Tawney argued in the early 20th century.

He also made the case that social wellbeing depended upon cohesion and solidarity. "It implies the existence not merely of opportunities to ascend, but of a high level of general culture, a strong sense of common interests and a diffusion throughout society of a conviction that civilisation is not the business of an elite alone, but an enterprise which is the concern of all."

"And individual happiness does not only require that individuals 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."

In contemporary England, where only 3 per cent of black, Asian and minority ethnic individuals become part of the establishment and increasing numbers of graduates from working-class backgrounds end up in low-paid, casualised work, it is clear that social mobility is not the answer to growing educational inequalities, any more than it was when Tawney was writing.

We have an oligarchy of the wealthy and economically powerful. In order to have a social democracy, which is fairer both economically and in terms of the distribution of power, we need to change the hierarchical nature of English society, not just the social class of a few individuals.

Instead of more neoliberal policies that focus on social mobility, state-school classrooms should be transformed from the task-driven, target-led, overly competitive environments they have become. The intense competition, testing and surveillance in English schools impacts negatively on the wellbeing of all children, particularly the large

numbers of working-class children who become positioned as educational failures.

In 21st-century England, there have been myriad educational policies that focus on raising aspiration and increasing social mobility, but none that adequately resource working-class academic achievement. A growing number – such as setting and streaming, excessive testing and assessment, and the intense focus on competition – work against working-class educational success.

Social mobility is the cheap policy option, in comparison with funding the English educational system so that it can support and nurture working-class educational success. It places the onus for change on the working-class individual, not on an unfair educational system.

Under social mobility policy initiatives, working-class children and young people are subjected to endless injunctions to be aspirational, expected to succeed against slightly reduced odds and transform into acceptably middle-class versions of themselves.

The more the focus is on social mobility, the less that the educational system and wider society have to change. Social mobility has become a means of validating and propping up the status quo – an outdated policy for tired neoliberal times.

It is time to move on and implement some policies that are socially just. Education would play a part through policies that prioritise collaboration, mixed schools, mixed classrooms and collegial rather than competitive ways of working. This would ensure that all children – regardless of social class – receive the same resources and standards, are encouraged to question and think critically.

We need to replace the separate educational strands for the upper, middle and working classes with socially just education for all, in which learning dispositions of confidence, entitlement, cooperation, curiosity, creativity and reflexivity are seen as rights.

Social mobility is no solution to educational inequalities. There is an inherent intellectual deceit and moral cowardice in arguing for social mobility as a policy objective – it implies that there is an incontestable virtue in a hierarchical social order. Moreover, the logical implications of upward social mobility – that it requires others to be downwardly mobile – are always glossed over.

But perhaps most importantly, social mobility attributes and establishes virtue in specific qualities and capabilities, such as wealth accumulation, hyper-competitiveness, individual self-advancement and self interest. Societies are in greater need of other qualities: social solidarity, collegiality, caring, compassion, environmental awareness, critical thinking and problem solving skills.

In our current austere post-Brexit times, a strong sense of common interests and the conviction that civilisation is not the business of an elite alone have largely disappeared. Consequently, any vision of a fair and just society needs to be much bolder and brighter than one that sees social mobility as the solution.

Making education a vehicle of neoliberal aspiration with a central aim of facilitating social mobility diminishes schooling. Rather, as Tawney argued, education should be 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".



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Cycling through the four types of annual appraisals

AS THE end of October looms, and pay decisions are due, everyone will be going through the process of completing appraisal cycles and setting targets for the new year. In every school I've worked, the process has been slightly different. In some cases, it seemed to be all about numbers. In others, the whole thing seemed more vague. Indeed, it seems that appraisal is all about who your appraiser is...

The number-cruncher

This leader is the sort who says, "don't bring me problems, bring me solutions", which is a surefire way of avoiding dealing with any problems.

When it comes to appraisal targets, their starting point is not the children and their achievements, but the spreadsheets and its needs. They're not interested in what's achievable, only in what will appease the data monsters. Comments will include "you need three more to be at expected, so...?" or "I hear what you're saying, but we need to get to 85 per cent". When it comes to pay decisions, you'll have to invest all your hopes in getting an easy cohort. Nothing you do will make any difference.

The offloader

One of those leaders who is quick to take credit for achievements – and just as quick to pass the workload on to others. They'll have probably asked you to think about what you'd like to include in your targets for appraisal. Then they'll fail to ask you about anything you've come up with, because they have their own plans in mind. The chances are, your targets will end up being very much like their own. What better way for them to achieve their objectives than to make you do them? Comments will include "I was thinking you'd be good at..." or "I thought this would be a great professional development opportunity for you"

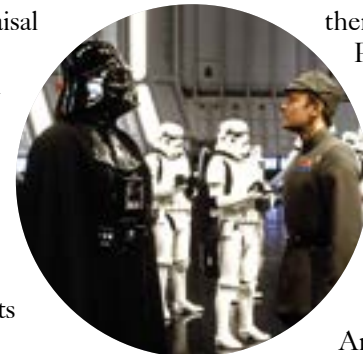
When it comes to pay decisions, you'll be OK as long as you tick the boxes.

The understander

Some folk just don't like confrontation. "The understander", would rather not be faced with these conversations at all, let alone have to take a lead in them. When it comes to setting targets, they'll be desperately hoping you've thought of something that will fill the necessary boxes without requiring any budget, time or effort from them.

They won't be full of praise for your achievements but nor will they demand too much. Their comments include "Yes, that sounds like a good idea" and "Well, perhaps you can choose the success criteria and write them in later?"

Pay decisions are easy: they won't want to offer too much challenge, so tell them that you did everything possible and they'll nod it all through.



The buck-passer

Another one who's not keen on direct confrontation, so will rely on hiding behind others. They might ask you what you want to include on your targets – they may even listen to your well-rehearsed and detailed rationale about what the success criteria should be.

But it won't be long before they're trying to stretch things that bit further. Not on their account, you understand. It'll be because of "the headteacher", "the governors" or "the multi-academy trust." Comments include "Well, obviously I would support it, but..." and "I don't think I'll be able to get that past them."

Pay decisions will be a grey area. You may well have met all your targets, but that won't stop them umming and ahing before you get a decision.

Best of luck with it all, folks! ●



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