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KURTZ: WHY HAVE ATTEMPTS TO PROMOTE EQUALITY OF OPPORTUNITY IN SCHOOLS IN THE UK
AND/OR OTHER COUNTRIES FAILED?

Winner of the Critical Writing Prize 2016 awarded by Critical Publishing



(Francken, F. 1605-1610)

Why have attempts to promote equality of opportunity in schools in the UK and/or other countries failed?

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Abstract

This paper opens with David Cameron's words on equality of opportunity. His assertion that we need to reach out to disadvantaged pupils is questioned through an examination of social mobility and homelessness in the UK. Analysis suggests that equality of opportunity is a societal, rather than educational issue. Using a metaphor from a Frans Francken painting, this paper argues that 'low achievers' are suffocated by those above them in the social hierarchy: hope of ascent is unrealistic. This paper concludes that instead of raising aspirations, the government should re-examine the responsibility of the establishment in keeping people 'in their place'.

Paper

In 2013, UK Prime Minister David Cameron said 'Just opening the door and saying 'we are in favour of equality of opportunity', that's not enough. You've got to get out there and find people, win them over, get them to raise aspirations, get them to think they can get all the way to the top'. *Why have attempts to promote equality of opportunity in schools in the UK and/or other countries failed?*

There are many points and questions raised by the above quotation. In what ways does David Cameron consider his government to be 'opening the door'? How does he think the task of raising aspirations should be tackled? By what mechanisms are the suitably motivated masses expected to clamber to the top? The answer to that final question is generally assumed to be education but educational interventions aiming to reshape society, as we shall see, are not working. The biggest issue with Cameron's words, however, is not in the implications and interpretations of what is said, but of what is *not* said. At no point does he take account of the environmental reasons for societal disparity. Instead he places the responsibility for creating a more equal society on those who are least empowered to make change, while (and I admit my cynicism on this point) the contribution from those at the top is simply to cheer them on. The foundation of his strategy is the unquestioned, underlying assumption of a hierarchical social and political structure, which by its very nature necessitates the division of the population into more and less privileged classes. Cameron is neither acknowledging the role of the hierarchy in creating and perpetuating inequality, nor suggesting that the establishment intends to or even should change in order to create a more equal society. This being the case, the sincerity of Cameron's claim of commitment to equality is cast into doubt.

My mental image of this hierarchy is a giant human pyramid gone wrong. In this grotesque image the foundations of the pyramid look something like Frans Francken's painting *The Damned Being Cast into Hell*, a mass of bodies: some looking fearfully upward, some hiding their faces to block out reality, some in chains; all being tortured by the occasional demon and crushed by the weight of those above as they try to resist the downward pressure. Looking at this image it is possible to make out routes of escape – ways that an opportunist might ascend from the pit – but this is only possible at the expense of those around them. It is only by scrabbling, shoving and climbing over other people that an individual can make their way to the top. In my mental image, way up at the top of the pile, a little below the billionaires and multinational CEOs, David Cameron is peering down

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through the mass of bodies yelling words of encouragement, perhaps somewhat selectively, because after all, not everyone can rise to the top or the foundations of the whole structure would fail. There are particular groups of society that form cornerstones, keystones and pillars that between them hold the whole thing up. If one or two individuals from these groups are able to take advantage of a momentary shift in the crushing pressure from above and work themselves free enough to respond to the aspiration-raising politicians at the top, there is no real threat to the hierarchy; but if there were movement *en masse*, the whole thing would topple. Perhaps the reason this does not happen is because the lower one is, the greater the threat of injury therefore the more concerned one becomes for one's own safety and survival and the less one is aware of the bigger picture. The pyramid is as evident in education as in every sphere of social life.

Equality of opportunity is the concept that everyone, regardless of social status, geographical location or family background, has access to the means with which to succeed in whatever they choose to do. Its main engine is education, through which social mobility is achieved by access to training appropriate to the desired field. This transformative function is the foundation of a meritocracy, since, in theory, any person can follow their dream to excel in their chosen profession. But how common is that story? There are indeed high achievers, take former prime minister and grocer's daughter, Margaret Thatcher, for example, but for each lucky individual who scrambles upward, there are hundreds who do not.

In reality school attainment is reliably predicted by family background and the numbers of working class people attending university are comparatively low. The disparity begins early and continues throughout education. Cognitive ability at 22 months is a reliable predictor of future attainment when combined with family background: those who score lower at this age but come from rich or well-educated families tend to catch up with peers, whereas similarly performing disadvantaged children do not (Feinstein, 2003). Reports from the Sutton Trust (2015) indicate that an elite minority are disproportionately represented in Britain's top universities, a situation exaggerated in Oxford and Cambridge, where almost half the admissions come from 200 of the UK's 3,700 schools (Sutton Trust, 2008). Furthermore, between 2002-2006 the top 30 independent schools accounted for 13.2% of Oxbridge entrance, compared to 7.5% from the top 30 state grammar schools, despite similar attainment at A level (Bolton, 2014). This means that a student has almost double the chance of being accepted from an independent school than they might at an equally performing state school and consequently better access to the associated career opportunities. The statistics demonstrate similar bias across all measures: Higher education and social class (Bolton, 2010, Jerrim, 2013), social mobility (Sutton Trust, 2015), school attainment (Noden & West, 2009).

At every level of education there is a tendency for societal inequalities to be recreated and even entry into a top university is not enough to guarantee access to the best opportunities. For example, over 30% of internships available to university students are unpaid and will incur living costs of around £5,000 (Sutton Trust, 2014), thus are unaffordable for anyone without substantial financial backing. Other opportunities come through family connections and networks that disadvantaged students are unlikely to have. Success, in many situations is dependent on who you know and how much money you have (Lin, 1999).

Clearly, if your background is disadvantaged you are less likely to succeed and if it is privileged your money and connections will gain you access to superior opportunities. Thus the inequalities of establishment institutions are self-perpetuating, some might suggest, intentionally so. As Ivan Illich puts it, 'Schools select for each successive level, those who have, at earlier stages in the game, proved themselves good risks for the established order' (Illich, 1970, p.34). Children brought up in households that understand, accept and value that established order thus have an advantage and social disparity is continued.

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It is not just institutions that perpetuate the status quo, however, children quickly learn to conform to their place in the social order. Performance of low and high caste Indian boys, was shown to be dependent on knowledge of other another's caste, with the low caste children marginally out-performing high caste when status was unknown and a large fall in scores in the low-caste group once caste was revealed (Hoff & Pandey, 2014). Adults' assessments of children's potential and ability are made through a lens that is too often biased by social prejudice and children deliver what is expected of them. Free of these expectations it seems that children can achieve more, guided only by their peers and their own curiosity. Mitra's (2006) hole in the wall experiments and the resulting concept of self organizing learning environments (SOLEs) (Dolan et al., 2013) demonstrate that minimal adult intervention, offered only if children's learning plateaus, is all that is required to acquire expertise. It is worth noting that children in these groups are generous in sharing their knowledge and equitable in their approach, slipping easily between teaching and learning roles, with younger children often teaching older ones. This is contrary to the hierarchical structure of most schools and work environments. Considering SOLEs alongside the findings on caste and performance, we might conclude that negative expectations of adult teachers most likely impede the progress of deprived and under-performing children, due to their compliance with externally imposed norms.

Family environment is also influential, since parents and other relatives provide strong role models. Children brought up in homes without books are inevitably less interested in reading (Payne et al., 1994). Furthermore, families can resist the socialising influence of school. Parents in deprived areas of London actively resist the middle-class influence of education because it seems to run contrary to their values of living for the present and enjoying life. Consequently, they tend not to push their children academically and allow them more freedom than their middle class counterparts (Evans, 2006). One positive result of this is that an academically motivated working-class child will be working hard for their own satisfaction, however they may also be discouraged without family support and valuing of their work. Still others may never realise that they have the interest and ability to succeed.

Educational inequalities, then, cannot be divorced from societal inequalities, however they are becoming increasingly important due to the polarisation of the latter in a neoliberal context. Successive British governments have essentially acted as puppets for multinational companies, offering them tax breaks and employment laws that encourage them to invest in the country, but these jobs benefit the employers more than the employees. This makes poor working conditions the norm that smaller, less profitable companies adopt: zero hour contracts, instability, minimum pay, all work in favour of increasing profit margins. Job insecurity makes it more difficult to rise through the ranks in employment, as early school-leavers were traditionally able to do, because so many contracts are short-term (Allen & Henry, 1997). Thus those without a university education, if they find a job at all, are likely to end up in a dead-end job with no prospects.

Evidently it is virtually impossible for the disadvantaged to succeed on merit alone, since the odds are against the poor from birth through to higher education. I would speculate that even those who play the game and gain qualifications have no guarantee of employment due to wider social issues and the consequences of failure appear to be increasingly severe. I have noticed an increase in the numbers of homeless people on the streets, even in areas where this has not previously been a problem. Unlike the usual hardened, weathered-looking substance users, the latest influx are mostly fresh-faced young men who seem frightened and out of their depth. It has troubled me to the point that I occasionally stop and talk to them, ask their story and buy them some food. Their stories are strikingly similar. These are not, as might be supposed, education's dropouts. Most of the young men I have talked with are qualified in a trade of some sort and have been left homeless after a

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relationship breakup. If they were addicts they would be considered vulnerable enough to qualify for assistance, but instead they are left to fend for themselves, unable to get work because they have no address and unable to take on a home because they have no paid work. Evidently education is no guarantee of employment. Government statistics show that rough sleeping has increased by half in the last 5 years and of the 28,460 applications for housing assistance in autumn 2014, less than half were accepted as homeless, 25% were considered not homeless, 18% homeless but not priority and 9% intentionally homeless and priority (Gov.uk, 2015). That leaves large numbers of 'low priority', mostly young people without help. One might be forgiven for imagining that this situation is intentional.

Whereas homelessness used to be associated mainly with mental illness or substance misuse, threats to domestic security can now be traced directly to government policy. The backdrop to the scene is the continuing sell-off of council houses, which means that low-cost social housing is increasingly difficult to come by; the introduction of the ill-advised bedroom tax has left people choosing between food, heating and rent payments for the sake of £20 a week (Taylor, 2014), and the recent ruling that homeless shelters are ineligible to accept housing benefit has left many vulnerable and led to hostel closure (Clarke 2014). The strain on services is such that only the most needy are prioritised and in many cases being classed as homeless results in being added to a waiting list rather than receiving immediate help. Healthy young men are consequently the ones left to fend for themselves.

At the other end of the scale we have bankers being bailed out by the state; superrich, celebrity lifestyles flaunted in the media; growing numbers of jobs with six-figure salaries and enormous bonuses; multinational companies exploiting their workforce for huge profits without contributing to the tax system of their host country, and politicians fraudulently claiming expenses that they are more than able to pay (Jones, 2015; Chomsky, 2012). Societal injustice and inequality seem to have become a defining feature of the early twenty-first century.

Aside from the consequences for those immediately affected by inequality, there appear to be detrimental effects at a societal level. *The Spirit Level* (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2010) shows how virtually all societal ills relate to inequality. Countries with the biggest disparity have higher rates of mental health issues and drug use; poorer health and life expectancy; higher rates of obesity (in nations where wages are above subsistence levels); poorer educational performance; higher teenage birth rates; higher levels of violence and imprisonment, and less social mobility. Furthermore, the data are not simply pulled down to a low average because of the poverty at the lower extreme; the rich are affected too. For example, health and life expectancy are worse for the rich in unequal countries than in more equal ones. Inequality breeds competition, raises anxiety levels and leads people to judge themselves by comparison, which impacts health and happiness at all levels (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2010). Evidently inequality is not good for anyone.

This being the case, it is surprising that governments are doing so little to reduce inequality. Simply raising aspirations as Cameron suggests is not good enough in a hierarchy because firstly there are not enough high-flying jobs available for all, and secondly, the type of people who succeed are, through necessity, more likely to be ruthless, determined and competitive; qualities that further undermine efforts towards equality. All that this strategy achieves is a few success stories and generations of people who feel they have failed. Cameron's words show no appreciation that there are alternative and equally valid priorities that people might choose over a career – caring for a relative or children, travel, spiritual devotion, or volunteer work may well be more important to some people than a successful career. Disparity in income makes spending a visible marker of success and people literally buy into consumerism to show their status, effectively reducing the meaning of life to the simple fact of earning power. In reality, fulfilment and self-esteem rest on

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more than the size of a pay packet. While this might sound contrary to current trends, children in more equal societies have less inflated aspirations (UNICEF, 2007), possibly due to the fact that there is less stigma attached to low-status jobs in more equal societies. If the government truly want to create equality, simply raising aspirations is not the way forward; what is needed is greater valuing of aspects of life other than career path.

Equality of opportunity, then, is not simply an educational issue. Inequality in education is a mirror image of inequality in wider society, which makes tackling it far more complex than opening doors and raising aspirations, and social policy needs to reflect this. As an institution however, education is better placed than most to engineer change. Differences in cognitive ability are evident by the age of 3 and consequently recommendations have been made for early interventions (Doyle et al., 2009). One approach that goes some way towards ameliorating early disparity is time spent in preschool, which has been reliably associated with equality of educational outcome. The longer children attend preschool before entering formal education, the smaller the disparity with regard to family background. The resulting later school entrance appears to be inconsequential (Schütz et al., 2008). This may be socially equalising because children are exposed to the influence of peers raised differently and learn the middleclass language and expectations of a school environment (Evans, 2006) before formal learning occurs. Lower national proportions of private, as opposed to state school, education are also associated with equality (Schütz et al., 2008). As we have already seen, fee-paying schools give pupils an edge when it comes to applying for university (Bolton, 2014) and it is unlikely that the privileged few will give up this advantage. Nonetheless it is an advantage afforded at the expense of the rich not just the poor, since educational attainment is higher at all levels in more equal societies (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2010). Lastly, the younger pupils are streamed into ability groups, the more unequal the educational outcomes (Schütz et al., 2008). Compulsory 'setting' of children according to attainment is currently a hot topic in education (Wintour, 2014a; Wintour, 2014b) and although the government do not plan to introduce it since it compromises school autonomy, setting has its supporters within the educational establishment, including OFSTED (Office for Standards in Education) (Wintour, 2014b).

With regards to equality of opportunity as a societal, rather than simply an educational issue, I would like to return to Francken's painting, *The Damned Being Cast into Hell*. What is needed as a first step towards rectifying this scene is not the current strategy of helping specially selected individuals who already conform to establishment expectations. This is neither fair nor will it result in equality because it does nothing to dismantle the pyramid and, for the majority, all the external familial, societal and cultural pressures and influences will remain, countering and resisting any number of aspirational speeches. Nor would a quick, brutal demolition be the way forward: one only need consider the cruelty and blood-shed of various revolutions and the inevitable instability or misuse of power in their wake to know the price of brutality for the greater good. Rather than making a tweak here and there it needs to be turned on its axis by 90 degrees so that the vertical becomes a horizontal. What is needed is nothing less than a paradigm shift so that instead of 'opening doors' and 'raising aspirations' the government are examining the responsibility of the establishment in keeping people 'in their place' and valuing all its citizens.

Rather than accepting the hierarchy, the aim needs to be more equitable, as in the parable of the long spoons, in which both heaven and hell are identical but in order to eat people must use a spoon with a handle so long that they can't reach their own mouth when holding it. In hell they go hungry, whereas in heaven they feed one another. In this image the solution is simple and until this government takes serious steps towards this ideal, I reserve the right to be cynical about their motives.

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