



In what kind of a world would it make good sense to spend a quarter of every pound spent on school education on just seven per cent of children, and the majority of your budget for the education of adults on younger adults aged between 18 and 20? On what planet would you be living if you thought it proper to spend the most on further educating the already best-qualified minority among these young adults – those who migrate from home to study at a few ancient colleges – while those who have up to now benefited the least get the least spent on them?

Of all the affluent or semi-affluent countries that the economists at the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) compare, only

Chile spends a higher proportion of its combined public and private education budget on children in private schools than does the UK, and only in England are young adults sorted so carefully between so many universities. And, of all the richest countries of the world, only in the United Kingdom are discussions under way to make an already elitist system much more elitist. National budget restrictions are leading many to suggest that ‘variable fees’ should now be used to fund higher education – for an early warning read the submissions made to the higher education funding review (<http://hereview.independent.gov.uk/hereview/>), and pay particular attention to those from the University of Oxford, and the headteachers of public schools.

Meanwhile, in further education, colleges are bracing themselves for a cut of £200 million to their adult course budgets; with institutions facing an average budget reduction of 16 per cent for adult learning. Forty-three of 162 colleges surveyed by the Association of Colleges said that their budgets for adult learning were being cut by 25 per cent for 2010-11. These reductions, which come on top of year after year of cuts and of a gradual narrowing of opportunity for adults wanting to learn, will impact directly on some of the least advantaged and most vulnerable learners and contribute to further growth in the inequality which characterises much of life in Britain, and its education system in particular.

In a country in which, even after the

# Tall tales and ripping yarns

As we approach the general election, Britain is as unequal as it has been for at least 40 years. Why, with plenty of resources to go around, does inequality persist, and what can education do to challenge it, asks **DANNY DORLING**

despair is inevitable.

One way to begin to understand the English education system is to read some of the stories written for children during the dying days of empire. Young readers were presented with a hierarchy of characters, with the subservient ones often depicted as animals, and 'lower' animals in particular. The stoats and the weasels in *Wind in the Willows* had limits to their abilities and needed to be kept in their place; so too with the great ordering of creatures in the *Narnia* chronicles; and it was the unruly subservient class getting above its station that threatened to wreck 'the Shire' and the natural order of a fictitious world in *Lord of the Rings*. Reading some of the submissions made to the HE funding review reminded me of these stories.

## Bedtime stories

In the bedtime stories read to children during the 1950s and 1960s hierarchy was constantly defended. It was portrayed as being under threat, in need of reinforcement. The same can be said of older stories of trains and tank engines with 'bolshie' buses and 'faithful' (female) coaches, or of cabals of privileged 'famous fives' or 'secret sevens' rounding up criminals from the 'lower orders'. In these stories folk from the lower orders could not be expected to benefit from access to education; they needed more controlling, less learning. The message was that privilege, spending and effort should be concentrated on the few capable of 'real promise', a

fortunate number presumably identified through personal academic interview at age 17 by thousands of middle-aged tutors given the task of grilling late adolescent children.

This kind of a fantasy world can only be sustained by enough people coming to believe they are superior, and that others are inferior to them. The awarding of the vast majority of education funding to a few requires a belief that elitism is efficient (and, by implication, that exclusion is necessary). This belief has to be sustained, not just within the ivory towers of elite universities, but down through the hierarchy of red-brick-and-concrete institutions, through ex-polytechnics and into further education colleges and state schools, where the most brilliant educators often still see it as a great achievement to get just one of their students 'into Oxbridge'.

In most countries in the world that have universities, it is your local university you aspire to attend, and, increasingly, most students now do.

In Britain more people are excluded from the norms of society by having too few resources to take part in normal activities than in almost any other OECD nation, more even than in Israel. It is only in the United States, Portugal and Singapore that income inequality ratios are higher. In the remaining 21 of the world's 25 richest countries income inequalities are lower. And in most of those more equitable countries education provision is more equitably applied, less condescending in approach and far less elitist in structure.

economic crash, there are plenty of resources to go around, we need to think hard about why inequality persists so much more strongly in Britain than anywhere else in Europe. The cause, I want to suggest, is a set of deep-rooted, hidden and unacknowledged beliefs, each unjustified yet passed off as an unfortunate fact of life; natural, innocent and long-standing. The five social evils identified by Beveridge at the dawn of the British welfare state (ignorance, want, idleness, squalor and disease) are gradually being eradicated. But social injustices are being recreated and renewed, supported by five new groups of unjust beliefs. I suggest that the five tenets of injustice today are: elitism is efficient, exclusion is necessary, prejudice is natural, greed is good and

Perhaps because of our lack of a good education, we in Britain look far too often to the United States for models of how we might better educate. When it comes to the expansion of adult facilities, the United States spends far more on its prisons than its universities. It is not a good model.

In Britain, educational apartheid is sustained by the belief that prejudice is natural; that some people are inherently less deserving and less able to do well in education or at work than others. A little training might be allowed, to offset the social and economic costs of poor basic literacy and numeracy, but it is vocational training, and not a broad, general education, that is mostly offered. 'Proper' education is for the few who, in time, will come to look after the interests of the many. They must almost think they were 'born to lead', these few. It's hardly surprising that they should come to believe in the natural superiority of their talents to those of the less fortunate majority of people. Indeed, it is difficult to seek power if you do not believe you are especially able. True, we might have to pay them much more to secure their attention later in life, but, still, it is us (they think), the everyday folk, who should be grateful.

The elite believe that their ambition and achievement (and, ultimately, their greed) promote economic growth, and that escalating economic inequality (and the reckless borrowing and mounting debt that results) is a price worth paying for this. *This is all wrong*. The idea that greed is good is wrong. The idea that the best most of us can aim for is a life the lucky few would despair of is wrong (the rise in depression and anxiety in places with wide inequalities suggests that despair is the normal response to these conditions). Most of us know it is all wrong. Sadly, the same is not true of many of those in power, those damaged enough by being selected out in various ways, at 11 or 17 (or in a very few cases later), to have come not only to believe in but also to defend elitism.

Children's stories and the stories we tell our children are changing. They might still contain fantastic animals that speak, and echoes of the society in which they are written, but less and less do they so overtly defend hierarchy. For younger children the typical plot of illustrated stories now concerns such issues as how sharing makes you happier (*Rainbow Fish*) and why patience, imagination and negotiation is good (*Charlie and Lola*). In contemporary children's fiction the heroes do not appear as ginger-beer swilling boarding school children sticking up for old England, but far more often as the offspring of more ordinary folk. Underdogs are increasingly being portrayed as eventual victors (*Harry Potter*), while hierarchy and authority are almost always now bad (*Dark Materials*). Part of the fun of being a good contemporary children's writer appears to be in trying to take the new moralising just that

extra step further.

Andy Stanton's *Mr Gum and the Biscuit Billionaire* was ahead of the times when published in 2007, in presenting one of the villains as 'a businessman in a grey suit who never smiled and told lies all the time'. Not all businessmen are liars, many are good at smiling, but during the boom years of New Labour we came to rely on businessmen (and a few businesswomen) far too much to determine all kinds of policy. Somewhere between 1997 and 2007 banking became the most celebrated of occupations in Britain. It was thought bankers could turn their hands to anything, understand anything, whether education, skills, drugs, pensions or climate change. Take Baron Alex Leitch, for example, a former investment banker chosen to conduct the Government's review of the skills system, or Baron Adair Turner of Ecchinswell (the one who recently admitted that banking was full of socially useless activity), the ex-banker who was given the pensions remit, and then the problem of climate change, before being made chairman of the Financial Services Authority.

#### 'Independent' review

Alternatively, look at who sits on the so called 'Independent Review of Higher Education and Student Finance'. The review is led by a former group chief executive of British Petroleum whose career includes spells as non-executive director at Intel, DaimlerChrysler AG, Goldman Sachs and SmithKline Beecham. Its members comprise the head of McKinsey's Global Education Practice; the CEO of the consultancy Enlightenment Economics; the vice-chancellor of the University of Birmingham and former chief executive of the Higher Education Funding Council for England (also Honorary Fellow of both St Peter's College, Oxford, and Keble College, Oxford); a former Director of Advanced Engineering at Rolls-Royce, now vice chancellor of Aston University; the group chief executive of Standard Chartered PLC; and, perhaps most appropriately, a UK board member of the Big Lottery Fund.

Elitism is partly sustained because people are unlikely to seek high office, or feel able to remain there, if they do not have an unusually high view of themselves and their abilities. But it is also sustained because we tolerate such arrogance, and accept so readily the idea of there being just a few great minds; of there being just a few individuals who should aspire to great positions of power, who are able to advise, lead and lecture. We rarely question why we have so few positions of great power, so few judges, so few executives, so few 'leaders'. Why is an 'independent' commission made up of just seven people advising all of us on the future direction of funding for higher education and students in Britain? If you took every top post and created two jobs, each on half the salary, you would do a great deal to reduce privilege.

The social evil of ignorance was the old injustice of too few receiving even the most basic of educations in affluent countries. The injustice of widespread elitism is revealed through the product of a surfeit of qualifications bestowed on those who already have most. This leads to others' abilities being labelled 'inadequate', a widespread excuse given for the growing inequality.

#### Destined to rule

Believing that you are superior, destined to rule, and that others should know their place and accept your orders, requires a particularly nasty kind of self-confidence. If you have been taught since childhood that most other people are not quite like you, if the heroes of your bedtime stories were children who wore jackets and ties, and bossed the lower orders around, then it may be hard for you to really see most other people as fully human. If you were a child of the 1970s and believed all this you never really fitted in anyway. The businessmen (and those few women) may have been in charge since 1979/1997, the Etonians may be returning, but their subjects are not the same kind of people anymore. The fantasy world of those in power, peopled by a few 'great people' and the rest, is being steadily undermined. We should thank children's writers for their part in that reassessment.

Aspects of better ways of thinking are creeping into policy, not just because the more careful of scientists are finding that we are all born with remarkably equal ability and inability, but also because their findings are falling on many more receptive eyes and ears than there ever were before. Still, many of these findings are only just getting in through the cracks not policed by those who favour inequality – or, as they more often call it, competition. Just two years after the passing of an 'Education' Act that described children as having limits, the Government's 2007 children's plan included a recommendation that group setting of children be abolished (hidden on page 69).

Within the citadel of Sanctuary Buildings, where the Department for Children Schools and Families is headquartered, there are parents who read the new stories to their children, wishing for a better world to come, and going against the grain of 57 varieties of school for some supposed 57 varieties of children. They might call it choice, but it is simply competition. And, as every good contemporary children's writer knows, competition is not good. Competition is what you could not escape in the classroom, it is the worst of your childhood memories, and, very often, the reason you are fearful of going back into learning as an adult. It is about judging, putting down, placing a few on pedestals and knocking down the rest. It is about losers and 'lessers' and it is not a good human way to work.

The mantra that we must compete harder,



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reward 'success' massively, and punish those seen as losers, is, thankfully, receding; for most of us at least. All around there are signs of dissent. The higher up the hierarchy you travel the more they are hidden, but they are there, even in the later pages of official government documents. They are to be found even in the upper echelons of English society, among the lords and barons. Even among bankers it is becoming hard to identify people to confer top posts upon who are squeaky clean, who believe that drugs should be illegal (Lord Turner didn't, so he wasn't given that brief) and that banking is a socially useful activity. And when it comes to singing from a set-belief hymn sheet it is becoming harder and harder to find a reliable congregation to sing along with you. The big marquees are becoming harder to fill with reliable members of the 'great and the good'. People are not robots, after all. The supporters of injustice are being opposed and social movements to challenge their views are gathering momentum.

Nevertheless, despite the emergence of more progressive ideas, elitism and inequality continue to condemn the large majority of people to mediocrity. Where extreme inequalities are allowed and encouraged to rise untrammelled, and prejudice towards the 'lower orders' threatens to become, once again, the norm, there is only going to be one

result: growing despair. Most children are still not read a book most nights. Many continue to fail under an elitist system of education which sorts, sifts and segregates from an early age, and puts many off education or ambition for life. We now read books of social solidarity to our offspring because we fear so much for their futures, much more than we did in the fifties, sixties or seventies.

Inequality harms us all. It dulls the mind and damages society. We have to learn as adults how to curtail the stupidity that has come to dominate much political thinking in the most unequal of rich countries, like Britain. We need to remember that it is not just the acceptance of these beliefs by a few that perpetuates inequality and injustice in lands of plenty, but the reluctance of many others to confront them. It's important that we, as educators, challenge these beliefs and encourage others to do so, and that, as parents, we give our children the tools they need to build something better. We cannot rely on our elite to do it, because they know so little.

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## 'Toffs and toughs'

This picture, taken by Jimmy Sime outside Lord's in 1937, has been used to illustrate the gulf between Britain's rich and poor for 70 years. First used in the *News Chronicle* under the headline 'Every Picture Tells a Story', perhaps its most famous use occurred in the January 1941 'Plan for Britain' issue of *Picture Post*, where it illustrated A.D. Lindsay's contribution on the English education system.

Lindsay argued for the reform of an education system divided along lines of social class, in terms not so very different to those invoked by campaigners today. After the war much of what was argued for in *Picture Post* came to pass, including the establishment of the NHS, and the gap between rich and poor narrowed, but as inequality grew sharply during the 1980s news editors began once again to turn to it.

As Ian Jack argues in a fine article in a recent number of *Intelligent Life* magazine, the boys in the picture, popularly – but not particularly accurately – caricatured as 'toffs and toughs', seem 'doomed for ever to represent a continuing social tragedy'.