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Class in the classroom

The British government has long been promising educational equality. Yet its policies have contributed to widening the gap

I've been reading the economist Thomas Piketty's most recent book, A Brief History of Equality, just published in English. I was finding it mostly uplifting — pointing as it does to the long progressive arc towards greater equality that has accompanied the construction of the modern world: the demise of slavery and colonialism, the continual expansion of human rights and the development of the welfare state.

Then I came to a section which brought me up short, entitled 'Educational equality: always proclaimed, never realised'. Here, Piketty draws attention to the 'monumental gap between official statements regarding equality of opportunity and the reality of the educational inequalities that the disadvantaged classes face'.

No politician can be seen *not* to stand for equal opportunities, *not* to claim that their party is in favour of social mobility or *not* to wish to reduce inequalities between regions — as between northern and southern England. The current buzz phrase for all of this in England is 'levelling up' and the UK government even has a secretary of state and a whole Department for Levelling Up (adjoined to Housing and Communities). It also has a shiny new white paper (framing policy), introduced with the claim that 'levelling up is a moral, social and economic programme for the whole of government'.

Governments spending less on those in need

But does this mean anything beyond the rhetoric? Piketty encourages us to use 'indicators and procedures' to fight discrimination and inequities — and there is no better indicator of a government's policies and priorities than how it spends its money.

Sure. Start children's centres in the UK, established under a previous

Labour government, provide community-based services for children and their parents in the most disadvantaged communities, often including early learning and day-care. In the decade preceding the pandemic, spending on them was cut by 53 per cent — slashing in half funding for an effective and, indeed, cost-effective service, capable of transforming the life chances of children.

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And that was only the average. Austerity-related cuts to local-government budgets were greatest in the most deprived areas with more families in the greatest need. Spending was reduced by 67 per cent in the north of England, translating to a cut of £412 per eligible child, compared with £283 elsewhere.

The government likes to gloss over this blatant discrimination and give the impression that it cares about equality of opportunity. In his autumn 2021 budget and three-year spending review, the chancellor (finance minister), Rishi Sunak, announced £82 million of new spending for 'family hubs' in 75 localities and £201 million for a programme for new parents and babies. That this new spending doesn't even come close to making up for the decade of prior cuts is however one of those monumental gaps between official statements and reality Piketty was writing about.

Money goes where more money is

The gaps are present all the way up the education system, from nursery to university. Piketty describes French education as 'operating under cover of 'republican' equality'. Although higher education is free (unlike in the UK), three times as much is spent per student in the *grandes écoles*, attended by the most privileged young people, as in the less prestigious universities. Students from the top social class make up 23 per cent of their age group but fully 92 per cent of those attending the highly selective *École Polytechnique*.

One of the most startling examples Piketty highlights is the system of legacy admissions in the United States. Private universities — though benefiting hugely from public funding — can give priority in admissions to the children of alumni and rich donors. Between 2010 and 2015 the private Ivy League universities received $41.59 bn that could be traced to public financing, yet many refuse to disclose their admissions practices.

A whopping 43 per cent of

The president of Harvard recently spoken out against a legal challenge to affirmative action

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(positive discrimination in favour of students from under-represented groups), praising the 'freedom and flexibility' it afforded the university *vis-à-vis* its admissions criteria. Yet that freedom and flexibility is mostly deployed to keep the children of the privileged coming. A whopping 43 per cent of white students are admitted not on academic achievement but such considerations as athletic prowess or their parents being staff members, having gone to Harvard or having donated a lot of money to it.

There is strong evidence that free and non-selective education systems reduce educational inequalities of social class, so a compelling case can be made for reform. Finland provides a shining example: a root-and-branch transformation from the 1970s of a lacklustre system led to it consistently performing at the top or near the top of the European educational league table, as recently explained by a world-leading Finnish expert.

Data as the solution

Piketty has faith that sunlight is the best disinfectant: if we have data we can act. We have, he says, to give ourselves the means to measure reality 'collectively and democratically', so that we can set quantifiable, verifiable equity goals, measure progress towards them and adjust our policies accordingly. Once we have data, he thinks, we can have public and democratic debate and create pressure for social justice.

One can admire this line of argument yet also recognise the strength of the vested interests ranked against it. Why would the privileged change a system that enhances and protects the life chances of their children? It is easy for them to dissolve protection of their own interests by appealing to every parent's wish to look out for their children, while branding attempts at reform as 'levelling down'.

In 2015, one of England's greatest playwrights, Alan Bennett, was asked what Britain was best at. 'What I think we are best at is hypocrisy,' he said. And he went on: '[A] substantial minority of our children receive a better education than the rest because of the social situation of the parents. Then we wonder why things at the top do not change or society improve.'

Piketty's meticulously-researched book shows that elsewhere too it seems difficult to win political backing for fair and equitable education systems,

underpinned by progressive resource allocation. In more optimistic vein, though, as Piketty points out at the close of his book, 'equality has made its way by overturning the rules established by the regimes in power'. We must use the awareness of that historical progress to stiffen our sinews for the battles ahead.

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