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‘You just need to work harder’: Misalignments between the rhetoric of social mobility and education for social justice

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Abstract

Examining the entanglement of democracy and social justice in education and the relationship to social mobility, this paper critiques the individualising nature of social mobility in policy discourse as inimical to human flourishing and education as a public good. The rhetoric of social mobility which responsabilises individuals for their success, without due regard to the systemic changes needed to enable this and the societal barriers to social mobility experienced disproportionately by some groups in society, is detrimental to social justice. A conception of education as a pathway to social mobility must be located in a wider vision of civic engagement in a more inclusive and fairer society. Yet civic engagement in education at the local level has been eroded, as illustrated in this paper by the example of an evolving model of school governance in England. As a corporatist, market driven reform, this model exemplifies how local democratic ties between schools and engagement with their communities can be undermined. Social mobility to enable opportunities, access and participation in democratic civic society becomes a fantasy when society is riven with systemic inequalities, lacks the necessary conditions to enable human flourishing and links to community engagement in education for democratic renewal are downplayed.

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Keywords

Education, democracy, social mobility, social justice, civic engagement, school governance, human flourishing

The short-lived UK Prime Minister Liz Truss was recently reported ([Smyth and Zeffman, 2022](#)) making the following statement when she was chief secretary to the Treasury between 2017 and 2019.

This has been a historical fact for decades. Essentially it's partly a mindset and attitude thing, I think. It's working culture, basically. If you go to China it's quite different, I can assure you. There's a fundamental issue of British working culture. Essentially, if we're going to be a richer country and a more prosperous country, that needs to change.

It seems that the former Prime Minister was implying that workers need 'more graft' and 'you just need to work harder' to do well either individually or collectively. This kind of thinking contributes to the rhetoric of social mobility which responsabilises individuals for their success in upward mobility, without due regard to the systemic changes needed to enable this. Education is often viewed as a way of achieving social mobility by equipping people with the skills deemed necessary for individual progress in the labour market. In this paper, we argue that a conception of education as a pathway to social mobility is flawed if it is not located in a wider vision of civic engagement in a more inclusive and fairer society. A democratic and participatory model of school governance can provide a site for such engagement and involvement of citizens but is under threat from the neoliberal forms of corporatised governance favoured and promoted by the profound changes in English school organisation enshrined in the academy programme.

The rhetoric of social (im)mobility

In the UK, discourses of social mobility have been increasingly featured in government policies and initiatives. [Ingram and Gamsu \(2022: 191\)](#) suggest that 'Social mobility is largely accepted as something that is desirable and achievable for both society and individuals and for the last 40 years it has been uncritically utilised by governments on both sides of the political divide to claim a commitment to equality of opportunity'.

The [Social Mobility Commission \(2022a\)](#) defines social mobility as:

the link between a person's occupation or income and the occupation or income of their parents. Where there is a strong link, there is a lower level of social mobility. Where there is a weak link, there is a higher level of social mobility.

The current discussions of social mobility often attribute any upward success to an individual's level of educational achievement, occupational position and income. It is therefore a nuanced and multi-faceted concept but the dominant discourse suggests a belief in social mobility as the solution to social class inequality and therefore a route to social justice. However, according to [Wilkinson and Pickett \(2010: 159\)](#) such inequality has a strong inverse correlation with social mobility; the greater the levels of inequality in a society, the less the degree of social mobility. The Chair of the [Social Mobility Commission \(2022b: 4\)](#) acknowledges income and wealth inequality is an

important theme but seeks to both downplay its significance and place emphasis on the agency of individuals in improving social mobility. Politicians often emphasise the importance of individual aspiration and efforts in social (im)mobility. Spohrer (2018) argues that ‘the perceived lack of aspiration among young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds is used as a convenient explanation for the stagnating levels of social mobility’. Recent large scale studies of inequalities suggest an emphasis on individualisation might be misplaced. For instance, Marmot et al. (2020: 5), in their review of health equity in England, demonstrate that society is faltering as a consequence of growing and persistent inequalities in the social determinants of health. This poses a challenge to attempts at individualisation of social mobility, asserting that it has stalled as ‘a result of the profound and persistent socio-economic inequalities in experiences in early years, education and the labour market’ (88).

The term ‘meritocracy’ is often referred to in the discussion of social mobility. The post-war period in Britain has often been characterised as the ‘rise of a meritocracy’, which was the title of a book by the sociologist Michael Young, published in 1958. The idea of meritocracy, in its original form, means rule according to merit. Thus meritocracy, when Young coined the term, was meant to imply the rule of those who did so according to merit and ability. The book was written as a satire, from the viewpoint of an author writing in the year 2033, looking back on the history of British education since the 1870 Education Act. Young’s (1958) essential argument was as follows: the years since 1870 had led to the creation of a meritocracy; the state education system served to sift out those with ‘merit’ (and defined what ‘merit’ was), creating a new ruling class; meritocracy was not desirable. A ruling class is still a ruling class (and through the tripartite system brought about by the 1944 Education Act, was often inaccessible to working class children). The definition of merit was too narrow, for example, what room for goodness or morality?

Yet Young’s term meritocracy caught on, but most users of the word saw it in a positive light – arguing that meritocracy could be linked to equality of opportunity and assuming that it was a basic function of the education system to ‘sift’ people into categories. Labour Prime Minister Tony Blair was particularly fond of the term. Littler (2017) suggests that, whilst meritocracy promises opportunity, it in fact creates new forms of social division. For example, she argues that there are a number of problems with meritocracy. Most tellingly, it denies or obscures questions of social justice; structural factors in education, the labour market and social institutions more widely. These popular conceptions of meritocracy depend on the individualised ‘ladder’ of social mobility; an essentialised conception of talent and ability which extend hierarchies of social worth. These features of social mobility render it as a ‘fantasmatic logic’ (Glynos and Howarth, 2007) obscuring and extending inequality.

Education for social justice

Our starting point in this paper is the idea that education, its institutions and arrangements for their governance are both dependent on and constitutive of democratic participation, access, equality of opportunity; and therefore rooted in a view of education as a shared public good. Our intellectual project is concerned, like that of Liz Truss, the recently departed Tory Prime Minister in the UK, with aspiration; but for us it is the aspiration of education as contributing to the building of a more socially just society rather than unrestrained, market driven economic growth. The former Prime Minister’s mantra of ‘growth, growth, growth’ defines growth in an economic discourse of gross domestic product, profit, loose fiscal policy and deregulation of labour rights, consumer protection, health and safety and sustainable environmental stewardship. Such a discourse finds no place for the social; that is questions of human well being, equity and fairness and the role of education in

providing citizens with the disposition and skills to play an active and fulfilling role in creating growth that is sustainable and just. Arguably the conception of growth inherent in the former Prime Minister's aspiration is anti-democratic; it denies citizens agency and suggests growth is imposed and top down. The 'supply side reforms' and their removal of regulation, checks and balances that are said to drive this growth represent a denial of local engagement and democratic control by communities and neighbourhoods, something evident in the way the academy programme in English schools has stripped communities of their control of schooling at a local level.

Systemic change is needed for the aspiration we speak of in this paper to be realised and sustained and without concomitant change to facilitate a more egalitarian society in which education is seen to play a part in strengthening the polity, arguably this intellectual project lacks sustainability. In terms of higher education, Nixon highlights its important role in developing capabilities that are needed if we are 'to find a voice and a presence within the polity' (Nixon, 2012:43). Our reading of social justice in education has inclusive participation in civic society as an intrinsic wider aim. An inclusive and democratic model of school governance is an important arena in which this aim can be realised. We assert that, promoting social justice in education without a concern to affect future changes in society is an expression of a fantasmatic logic (Glynos and Howarth, 2007) at work; a logic that holds out the fantasmatic vision of a better future without the discomfort of the difficult social and political choices that disrupt and problematise the existing governance and relationships of power in education. Without this, the aim to promote access to and participation in an inherently unfair system sustains the fantasy of a society with the necessary conditions to enable human flourishing.

It is evident that there is an important need for clarity about conceptions of social justice and its relationship with social mobility (Arthur et al., 2021) and as our view of social justice is rooted in a constructive view of human flourishing and a better society, we are drawn to a definition of the concept of social justice as 'targeting the ideal of giving each person her due in the sense of facilitating each person's actualisation of her capacities for a flourishing life, all within the context of the common good' (Arthur et al., 2021:107). The idea of the common good, which suggests the link between social justice and social relationships, provides an important demarcation with current conceptions of social mobility. For Tawney, as for us, 'the implication of equality (and inequality) for the richness of man's [sic] common life was the paramount issue' and for Tawney 'Equality as the condition of disparate individuals ... was less important ... than equality as a relationship' (Terrill, 1974:135). Thus equality and social justice is bound up with 'personhood'- persons-in-relation (Macmurray, 1961), and societal good. As Dewey (2008: 80) maintained, 'Society is individuals-in-their-relations. An individual apart from social relations is a myth - or a monstrosity'.

Barnett (2022: 227) highlights an important flaw in the discourse that seeks to align social justice and social mobility. An approach which emphasises justice as being concerned with fairness privileges the fair allocation of what is currently available. In respect of education, such an approach suggests education as a commodity in the marketplace and, efforts to promote social justice as fairness emphasise the regulation and operation of the market rather than problematising and critiquing the principle of the market as a model for how education is defined and organised. The notion of fairness therefore fits within the neoliberal marketisation of education as a commodity which sits at the centre of the changes wrought to English schooling by the academy programme.

In this conception, social justice as fairness aligns itself with the state's thinking about social mobility. In the context of England, for the [Social Mobility Commission \(2022b\)](#) social mobility is about creating more accessible pathways for individuals to move upwards in social, occupational and economic terms within existing structures and modes of organisation. It does not seek to challenge or question the nature of current social and economic arrangements nor whom they

benefit. Barnett's (2022) discussion of social justice as fairness invokes Theodore Adorno's (2003) view that human progress is not served by bringing more people into a flawed and unjust societal mainstream but by challenging those mainstream arrangements.

Social justice, social mobility and democracy

Sen (2010) argues for an idea of justice which locates democracy at its core and focuses on activity and social change which enhance justice rather than the pursuit of what he terms a 'transcendental approach' which seeks to construct perfectly just institutions and societal arrangements. Democracy in this conception is to be assessed in terms of 'public reasoning' and as 'government by discussion'. Democracy is therefore a way of living in community with others rather than a system of government or the formal institutions of representation. It is characterised by plurality and should be judged 'by the extent to which different voices from diverse sections of the people can actually be heard' (Sen 2010: xiii). Social justice and community engagement are, we argue, integral components of democracy and school governance is an important site in which they can be shaped and practiced. Current UK state thinking about social mobility however disavows the importance of community. Amongst the four drivers of social mobility identified by the Social Mobility Commission (2022b: 103), what they term Social Capital and Connections would seem to encompass engagement. The Commission acknowledges a decline in civic engagement, but nevertheless downplays the significance of democratic participation, community engagement and community as a driver of social mobility. Indeed Sennett (2012) argues that social mobility, 'the luck of escape' (248), is corrosive of community and potentially harmful to individuals; 'the upwardly mobile are often cut adrift, ill at ease with new-found wealth or power' (257). Barber (2003: 214) asserts that the individualism which underpins social mobility, denies the social and is therefore inimical to strong democracy which enables people with all their varied natures and different interests 'to live together communally not only to their mutual advantage but also to the advantage of their mutuality' (118).

The authors of the recent report from the cross-party think tank Demos echo this critique of social mobility and its relations with community, suggesting that official prescriptions and policy formulations do not enhance social justice at a local level but instead contribute to a decline of local communities (Stephenson and Harrison, 2022). What is required, they suggest, is a focus on improving life chances and opportunities of people who wish to stay in their local towns and areas rather than creating individual pathways of improvement which require people to move away (physically or metaphorically). Central to this aim is the strengthening of local democratic engagement of citizens and genuine devolution of control over resources and policy to a local level such as might be at the heart of a participatory model of school governance; democracy and enhancing social justice is the heart of local renewal which is necessary to create the conditions for individual advancement.

Misalignments and implications: Social justice, democracy and school governance

As we argue above, social justice, education and democracy are closely entangled. In this section we examine how this entanglement is manifest in one important aspect of education in England; that of school governance. The evolving model of school governance in England, based on conversion of publicly funded schools from locally controlled assets to privately run academies, represents a significant but under-appreciated turn away from democratic forms toward a corporatised, market driven model. The impact of this turn is significant; from approximately 200 academies in England prior to 2010 over half of all children are now educated in such institutions (Pennington, 2022). This

turn is manifest in the post 2010 drive to academy status for English schools. Academies are state-funded but independent schools under contract to the Secretary of State for Education and divorced from local democratic public stewardship exercised by elected local authorities and instead under the control of unelected, self-appointed boards of trustees. Since 2015, academies are increasingly being encouraged and coerced by the central government to form Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs). MATs replace the model of a single privately controlled school with a larger corporate entity, again under private control, made up of a number of individual academies which give up their legal status as individual schools and cede all power to the central board of trustees of the MAT. This process of MAT formation and growth serves to unravel the links between education and local democracy and acts as a form of neo-colonial practice which is inimical to enhanced social justice and corrosive of democratic community.

England is not alone in pursuing such a neoliberal reform of schooling. [Sahlberg \(2012\)](#) locates these reforms, characterised by a drive to greater school autonomy, parental choice, competition, corporatised forms of governance and a market in schooling, in what he terms the 'Global Education Reform Movement (GERM)'. Governance of schools in the GERM has introduced the doctrines and prescriptions of New Public Management with an emphasis on functional and fiscal decentralisation rather than genuine devolution and dispersion of power based on democratic local participation and decision-making ([Rizvi and Lingard, 2010: 117](#)).

The need for local engagement of citizens in democratic practice through participation in local associations and community activity was famously chronicled and brought to light by De Tocqueville's study of the United States in the early 19th century ([De Tocqueville, 2003](#)). Writers on democracy, particularly in the United States, have subsequently built on De Tocqueville's foundations to develop, update and re-emphasise the importance of local engagement of citizens as the cornerstone of what [Barber \(2003\)](#) terms 'strong democracy'. In this context 'democracy requires explicit efforts to bring into being a people capable of engaging in modest self-government' and it 'also requires a robust cultivation of society as the place where we experience a linked fate across our differences and separateness' ([Brown, 2019: 27](#)). Social justice is thus the 'essential antidote' to the inequalities and unfairness inherent in neoliberal forms of social organisation based on market logics. [Brown also suggests \(2019: 27\)](#) that social justice, through its 'modulation of the powers of capitalism, colonialism, race, gender and others' is what maintains the promise of democracy. We therefore wish to suggest that social justice requires the identification and strengthening of opportunities and sites for the exercise of such 'modest self government.' In the UK context, [Ranson et al. \(2005\)](#) demonstrate the field of school governance provides a site where such local democratic expression involving large numbers of citizens can flourish. The model of governance enshrined in Education legislation and developing state policy in England since 2015 dismantles this model of stakeholder, community centred governance in favour of a corporatist, market driven form which privileges private and business interests and destroys community control. The following section draws on empirical evidence from a small scale study of MAT governance to illuminate how this developing policy environment emasculates community engagement and thereby restricts and erodes local democracy thus curtailing social justice.

In this section we examine how the MAT model of school governance promoted and enforced by government and now being enacted in England is privileging arrangements and ways of being that diminish and delegitimise democratic governance. We argue they are therefore inimical to social justice because 'there is an intimate connection between justice and democracy' ([Sen, 2010: 326](#)). In a small scale case study of governance and community engagement by MAT boards in three MATs, [Pennington \(2022\)](#) analyses how evolving models of school governance in England are increasingly hierarchical, corporatised and market driven and eschew participation and involvement of

communities. The operation of such forms of governance is interpreted as a form of neo-colonial ontological and epistemological practice in which MATs acquire and reshape schools and the community of those who constitute them as subjects without agency and voice. The new forms of governance adopted by the MATs in the study are driven by the logics of the market and dictates of the state in the form of the Department for Education (DfE) in England, its officers and associated agencies and are presented as the only possible option. As Pennington (2022: 204) asserts:

MATs were channelled in a particular direction which concludes with one approved and acceptable model for governance and accountability arrangements. Governance is a corporate model based on privileging business skills and removing connection with community. Accountability is hierarchical and exercised through judgement of performance against externally derived metrics.

The formation of a MAT therefore represents a significant turn away from modes of community oriented governance which have a long history and antecedents stretching back several centuries (Pennington, 2022). Nationally, this process is experienced both as: an enforced neo-colonial takeover of schools by what is perceived as a hostile MAT and as a more subtle, consensual process. The former being the experience of what the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) in England deems failing schools whilst the latter is that of more successful schools who chose to become part of a MAT. In Pennington's case study:

MATs perceived this experience as supportive, helping them to navigate unfamiliar territory rather than a forceful imposition, even though the result was some significant shifts in models of governance from a representational model to a more exclusive corporate arrangement with no community accountability.

The study suggests that however it is experienced, this process of MAT formation and growth can be located in a neo-colonial discourse as it entails the take over and absorption of the territory, subjects (staff, children, young people and families) and resources of a school. This is a process which entails the epistemological dominance of the MAT and the reshaping of the professional and even personal identities and value positions of those involved. Shahjahan (2011: 189) argues that neo-colonial discourse enshrines 'monocultures of the mind' which privileges particular or superior knowledge and establishes control over which knowledge has dominance. The MATs in the study are shown to create and define the 'superior knowledge' of school governance and deploy it as a technology to both justify and facilitate the take over and absorption of schools. Such 'superior knowledge' is manifested in: technical spheres such as finance, administration, risk and asset management; questions of curriculum and pedagogy; the imposition of a new order of discipline and conduct; and centralised and hierarchical forms of governance and accountability. The governing bodies of individual schools are stripped of decision making powers, control of budgets, authority over the school and accountability to the community it serves, to be reconstituted as advisory bodies whose remit is set by the MAT. Any power vested in such advisory bodies at school level to make decisions or exercise authority over the school is strictly within the gift and at the discretion of the MAT board and contingent on compliance with the MAT's requirements and performance standards. MATs term this 'earned autonomy' but the study (2022: 96) uses understandings of autonomy such as those offered by Lukes (2005: 115) and Greany and Higham's (2018: 35) notion of 'coercive autonomy' to challenge and question to what extent autonomy in such circumstances can be deemed real autonomy.

Nevertheless, the functioning and smooth operation of MATs and their schools would seem to require an acceptance of this situation and compliance and cooperation with the MAT by the people

working, studying and associated with them. The study suggests that compliance is not simply achieved through the exercise of raw power but a more subtle formulation. Power in MATs is not solely in the hands of senior MAT officers or the structures of management and accountability and applied to and against the constituent schools and the people in them. Power circulates, never in the possession of one individual or group. It is exercised through the network of relations, interactions and transactions that constitute the operations of the MAT (Foucault, 1980: 98). In this conception of power, individual actors and the constituent schools in the MATs studied by Pennington are the vehicles of power not simply the points and places at which it is applied and enacted. The way in which MATs exercise power can be said to be a manifestation of Lukes' (2005: 106) third dimension of power; those managing and leading MATs secure the compliance and cooperation of others in achieving their desired outcomes by convincing them that these outcomes are not imposed but arise from their own choices and are in their own interests. The MAT trustees and senior officers are exercising power in their governance function through 'management of possibilities' and 'structuring the possible field of action of others' (Foucault, 2020: 341).

MAT relations with constituent schools and their communities are examined through the neo-colonial lens and the study concludes the dominant construct is that of the civilising mission, a 'rhetoric of power (that) all too easily produces an illusion of benevolence' (Said, 1994: xxi) in which colonisation is justified because it is said to take place, not for the interests of the colonising power but out of duty to improve and benefit those being colonised (1994: 137). This is a framework 'constructed out of biological determinism and moral political admonishment' akin to that offered by Said (2003:207) in analysing the relations between colonisers and colonised that enabled western powers to view the latter in the age of European imperial expansion as 'problems to be solved or confined or – as the colonial powers openly coveted their territory – taken over'. In the MAT context, this civilising mission is a technology of power and control presented as benevolence and support. It has diminished and downgraded the role of community in governance of schools and reduced constituent schools of MATs to local agents of a centralising power and their communities to passive recipients and consumers of services rather than active participants in shaping their educational futures. Where once there were school governing bodies with real and substantial powers providing a potential site for the practice of associated living, public reasoning and government by discussion, there are now satellite advisory bodies whose membership, remit and very existence is entirely at the discretion of an all powerful central Trust Board.

If, as we argue above, there is an inseparable entanglement of democracy and social justice, such a neo-colonial arrangement which eschews community engagement and denies democratic modes of governance, reduces the possibility that MATs can be agents of social justice. Pennington's study (2022) concludes that the tendency is for MATs to embody relations of dominance and benevolence with schools and their communities. Whilst it can be argued that schools and MATs do respond to needs and concerns within the communities they serve, the study suggests this is rooted in a neo-colonial discourse and is concerned with fairer distribution rather than a challenge to an unjust set of social arrangements. It privileges a subservient position for communities rather than being concerned with an emancipatory approach and fostering involvement, engagement and democracy.

Conclusion

In this paper we have sought to identify and illuminate some of the threads which connect and weave together democracy, social justice and social mobility as illustrated in the particular case of school governance in England. Despite an elision between social justice and social mobility in the discourse of education and schooling, we suggest the dominant conception of social mobility is

inimical to social justice. Social mobility is concerned with improved access for some individuals to the benefits of an unfair and unequal society rather than changes and realignment of unjust social and institutional arrangements. The current UK government policy and its enactment eschews moves toward greater equality and enhanced democracy at a local level. Attempts at promoting social justice in education without a concern to affect future changes in society is an expression of a fantasmatic logic (Glynos and Howarth, 2007) at work; a logic that holds out the fantasmatic vision of a better future without the discomfort of the difficult social and political choices that disrupt and problematise the existing governance and relationships of power in education. Without this, the aim to promote access to and participation in an inherently unfair system sustains the fantasy of a society with the necessary conditions to enable human flourishing. For human flourishing, it is important that education prepares people as members of the polity to challenge injustice and to contribute to the renewal of a democratic and just civic society.

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