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Are students pre-programmed to live with inequality?

A speaking tour of schools and colleges reveals a gulf in young people's ideas of where they fit into society

Danny Dorling, The Guardian, Tuesday 26 October 2010, Article history



Danny Dorling on the road: 'As our education system has become more divided, it becomes harder for students to know what is normal'. Photograph: Lorne Campbell/Guzelian

Just before the comprehensive spending review, as Lord Browne recommended limitless university fees, I went on tour around the country. In one energetic week I gave the same talk on the geography of injustice to six groups of students, four studying for A-levels and two for degrees, all at their invitation. My audiences were students of a bog-standard (but certainly not under-average) comprehensive, a selective grammar school, a famous public school, a further education college, and two universities, one new, one old.

What shocked me as I travelled around was how great was the range of reactions of these students to hearing about inequalities in Britain. For some, it was old hat. For some, my figures were simply biased; for others, I had not covered what they saw as the real inequality: prejudice against the affluent and favouritism of the poor.

These students were studying for the same A-level, or for a degree in the same subject. I simply showed them the same five short films and asked for their responses.

Usually when talking to other people, like politicians, we temper our views to fit in with the group. Talk to students and you try to find something in common. But a film is a film and it says what it says. These films were based on a combination of the arguments presented in my book, *Injustice: Why Social Inequality Persists* and Carl Lee's brilliant recent study of a city: *Home: A Personal Geography of Sheffield*.

Over the summer, Carl Lee and I had made five very short films. Sheffield City Council had awarded us £200 to cover the costs, the biodiesel, some equipment, and the coffee. Each concerned debate over an aspect of injustice: educational divisions, unfair incomes, prejudice against the poor, unequal wealth, and inequalities in health. All were set in Sheffield.

When I took my show to a comprehensive school in Berkshire, the sixth-formers said that they thought they were quite lucky to be living in that affluent part of the south. None of them seemed to balk at the divisions being shown. One boy told me he hoped to go into progressive politics and asked what I thought he should study if he went to university. I scratched my head and then apologised – all I could think of was trying for PPE at Oxford, but I hoped that when he was my age we might be drawing from a wider pool for our political leaders. It cannot get narrower.

The further education students were not phased at all by the films. Some of them were my age; some came from the areas we'd filmed. They wanted to know "so what do we do about it?"

The old-university students (also in Yorkshire but not from Yorkshire) said they thought their generation had been taken for a ride. They would be in debt for decades to come and were about to have to compete in the worst-ever graduate job market: "You can't afford to even think about raising a family," said one young woman.

At the new university, in the Midlands, the students seemed to believe that what happened to them next was in the lap of the gods. One film contained a map of who tends to get to university and which universities they tend to get to. They appeared very happy to have got this far. They came from a wide variety of backgrounds and countries, and had a range of views, but knew all about how much where you grow up influences your life-chances. "I take it as it comes," said one. "Just wait and see".

In contrast, the children from the selective grammar school, in Birmingham, were quite indignant when I suggested that postcode was a good indicator of future achievement. Some said that if you worked hard you could do well regardless, although others disagreed. There was a wide range of views in the school hall. One said that if someone was intelligent, and got to a good university and got a good degree, they'd get a good job and live in a nicer area of the city. And their children would be more intelligent, said the student.

Some said poverty was no excuse; they had travelled very far to get to school that day (almost none of them lived nearby).

I began to realise that students now are being conditioned by preparing for so many exams, regardless of what we teach them. Repeated examination success suggests that your future is down to your own hard work and you will be graded and rewarded

appropriately. Here pupils were actually debating, but the debate was just among themselves; a group who had mostly been selected at age 11 and had chosen, or been forced, not to go local.

At a well-known public school in Berkshire, the boys voiced a far narrower range of opinions than the grammar school students of the same age. "Is it fair that some people have to pay a higher rate of tax?" asked one boy rhetorically. They said the films suggested that I'd like to see their school closed down. In fact, I quite like variety in education, but I'd like to see expensive [schools'](#) share of overall funding reduced towards the norm. Perhaps foolishly, I quoted Nelson Mandela's 1964 speech on an "ideal for which I am prepared to die". Mandela singles out education spending in that speech. I suggested that Mandela was right, that those in most need of teaching should not have the least spent on their schools. They looked a little shocked.

After showing the films it struck me just how different are the worlds of these young people. How, for most of them, in their groups, they are likely to be near the average, not the wealthiest in their class, nor the poorest. But how, as our education system has become more divided, as people further segregate by area and hence by school, divide further still where selective entrance is allowed and further still where school fees are soaring, it becomes harder for students to know what is normal, and easier to feel aggrieved, rather than realising that they are all walking into the same society, into the same mess which, like their school and university choice, was largely not of their making.

I can see now, in a way that was less clear at the start of my week, how adults from different backgrounds can end up holding such differing views from each other. School students hide their opinions less well, temper them less, and have not yet, if fortunate, been battered by life's ill fortunes into having much doubt.

We teach young people in separate institutions how to fit into an unjust society. Those most likely to get to the top are the ones most likely to think it fair that they got there.

- Danny Dorling is professor of human geography, University of Sheffield

Danny Dorling's book *Injustice: Why Social Inequality Persists*, is published by Policy Press.

Carl Lee's book *Home: A Personal Geography of Sheffield*, is published by Fou Fou Publishing

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