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Education policy

Government policies are turning education into a production line

Danny Dorling

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Classrooms are crumbling and inequality is getting worse, but the government's priorities are more testing and free schools



David Cameron and the education secretary, Nicky Morgan. 'If the government's current trends continue, in five years' time, our education system will ... only serve the interests of a tiny minority.'

Photograph: Yui Mok/PA

The majority of young adults and the parents of young children in the UK did not vote for this government and with good reason. The only age group to swing towards the Conservatives were people aged over 65. Just enough of the affluent elderly were located [in just the right places to matter](#). Never under a democracy have so few wielded so much power over so many.

So, the people who care most about education did not vote for the Tories, with their record of creeping privatisation, high-stakes testing, no new school building, the hiring of unqualified teachers and the raising of tuition fees.

After the election, primary school children in my home town [wrote to the prime minister](#) imploring him to allow some spending so they did not have to freeze in their classrooms in winter. In response, the government said it was the council's responsibility. But it is central government that has cut council budgets, including those to maintain school buildings and heating systems.

This government does not care about schools or children in poor areas. Why should it? Hardly any of its members of parliament represent such areas, or poorer children. So they do not repair damaged schools, or root out inequality, or shore up struggling families for the sake of their children's future.

Instead, they show what strange priorities they have. Even in hard times, money can be found for their untested educational whims. Some £241m has already been spent setting up free schools in areas where [no need for new schools has been forecast](#). Much more such spending is planned. Think how many school boilers and buildings could be repaired with [that money](#).

Huge amounts are also to be wasted on a few ministers' pet theories. From September, all children in English state schools [will be tested](#) on their "ability" in their first few weeks at school. What a stupid way to start a child's education – unless you really want to instil a sense of failure from a very early age.

Private companies have bid to carry out the new baseline tests, designed to create the illusion that you can determine a child's potential future at age four. The tests have been criticised and a [call has been made](#) to boycott them.

You cannot with any accuracy predict an individual child's future. The test scores of thousands of four-year-olds will severely restrict their future achievement. The least confident, often children growing up in poverty, will be labelled "low ability" and of "limited potential" from the start.

By the time 2020 comes, what sort of state will the schools system be in? The buildings will be even more dilapidated. There will be an over-supply of places where [free schools have proliferated](#).

[The government is set to pass a law](#) committing future governments to spend less than they raise in taxes each year and not to borrow. At present, the government borrows from the rich by selling them bonds that we all have to pay back with interest. But what if, instead of borrowing from the rich in future, we taxed them properly, at normal European rates of taxation? For the sake of education and the young we should look at better taxation of the affluent older generation.

Many [models for doing this](#) are being proposed. None are as radical as suggesting we should tax and spend at normal European levels. But we currently tax and spend so lowly in comparison with other countries in Europe that we have a huge [range of options](#) open to us.

We tax and spend so little because it is in the short-term interest of the affluent. We test so much because our government wants children, schools and parents to know their place and focus on their own little individual aspirations.

We test so much because our government wants children, schools and parents to know their place

Meanwhile, lifting the cap on student numbers at university will not necessarily produce more places. Markets create winners and losers but result in failing firms, failing hospitals and failing universities.

If current trends continue, in five years' time, our education system will resemble a production line with only the interests of a tiny minority at heart. Great damage is being done – perhaps enough to inspire people to move the trend back towards genuine education and cooperation, and away from testing and competition. You can only go down the wrong road for so long before you have to admit you are lost.

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His latest book is [Injustice: Why Social Inequality Still Persists](#)