Educational Research | Lancaster University

The case for an egalitarian education system in England: What is stakeholder opinion on abandoning classist structures?

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January 2021

Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
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This thesis results are entirely from my own work and has not been offered previously for any other degree or diploma.

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ABSTRACT

Structural levelling of England's steeply hierarchical educational landscape is a popular policy proposal advanced by egalitarian educationists. Social actors of this tradition are wedded to ending the system's widely reported classist segregation, and are ideologically opposed to the current policy 'norm' of passing as social justice stopgap interventions that leave the education system's neoliberal character intact, even as its steeply hierarchical nature perpetuates classism. This qualitative research put to the opinion of non-policy making stakeholders the egalitarian proposal that educational structures like private schools and all manner of hierarchical provision in the English state-sector be abandoned for a truly socially just education system to emerge. In so doing, the enquiry undertook the challenge of establishing wider appeal or policy viability of this long-held 'socialist' suggestion in the context of what is largely a liberal democracy. The proposal was resoundingly rejected by all stakeholder types, revealing a stark commitment to meritocratic accounts of social inequality, and an unwavering endorsement of current school structures as facilitating a fair system in which those endowed with natural ability or 'work hard' merit superior educational opportunities. Should this finding reflect wider public opinion, it would dent the moral case for the egalitarian advocacy and sever any hope of democratic mandate for policy makers concerned about class-based educational inequalities. Yet, it is important to lend ear to the egalitarian charge that the pervasive meritocratic turn identified in this research is a scam, a false-consciousness, which, like the American Dream, disguises the real determinants of social inequality – wider socio-economic inequalities and the structural organisation of schooling – which lie beyond the agency of the individual and which those benefiting from meritocratic practice have not earned. Though it looks like the neoliberal conception of social justice will hold English educational policy hostage for the foreseeable future, the prospect of a national service continuing on a trajectory of social inequality perpetuation does not augur well for the notions of a 'fair' society, a tag

the UK prizes. Neither is meritocratic validation of educational inequality made easy by the growing epidemiological evidence that inequality is causally linked to adverse health and social outcomes and environmental degradation.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There are many people whose invaluable academic, emotional and material support made the finalising of this thesis possible. I would like to thank my supervisor Dr. Murat Oztok for his support, feedback and critical engagement which enabled me to sharpen and refine my scholarship. Murat's patience and encouragement showed a deep understanding of the tribulations of PhD thesis writing and the crucial role of supervision in the pivotal journey of confirming oneself as an independent researcher. Massive thanks to the Lancaster University Doctoral Programme in Education and Social Justice Cohort 4 team for their nurturing academic expertise which emphatically underscored the expectations of the path taken, transforming me into an enthusiastic and proud researcher. Thank you Prof. Carolyn Jackson, Dr. Jo Warin, Prof Nicola Ingram, the late Dr. Steve Dempster, Dr. Jenny Thatcher, Dr. Janja Komljenovic, Dr. Gemma Derrick, Dr. Melis Cin, fellow cohort 4 students and support staff Sheila Walton and Joanne Dickinson. Thank you to my research participants for putting up with those long conversations and my rather incisive and daunting questioning, and to school gatekeepers for allowing/supporting access despite tight curriculum schedules. An undertaking of this scale would not be anywhere near successful without your cooperation and informative participation – those personal stories and opinions on your experience of English education were richly enlightening. Fundamentally, none of this would have been possible without the crucial support of my family. To my wife Prudence, a massive thank you for your continued and unquestioning support, those uninterrupted cups of tea and snacks turned out to be the fuel needed to banish the insanity of a juggled existence. And to my three wonderful children – Aluoch, Tanaka and Ogola – thank you for always making me realise what is truly important. You may be glad to know that those heated meal and 'clip' time discussions constantly aided my reflection, and became the mortar that clarified my thinking and underlined the joy of an examined life. Aluoch, I watch with great fulfilment how our engagements in the course of this

journey have transformed you into an accomplished philosopher and social democrat, in your own words, ‘relentlessly challenging bigotry wherever it dares surfaces’. A massive thank you to my late dad Osindi K’Olero who made bare survival possible, and to my mum Aluoch Nyong’ueya who against all odds never gave up on my love for academics, holding to hope even when the future looked totally bleak! To my good friend Chrispine Awuor, thank you for giving time to our rather iconoclastic outlook to life. Our polemical ‘analysis’ of ‘everything’ refined my train of thought, constantly reinvigorating the vital attitude of enquiry necessary for an academic undertaking of this stature. Many thanks to work colleagues Alan Webster, Paul Finnigan, Michael Graham and Joe Barrow for those rather humorous yet deep discussions on life, the state of our social institutions, and the environment. They went a long way in enriching the progress of this thesis, affording me a smile whenever I seriously needed one. And to the many others not mentioned who supported this research in various ways, I thank you.

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ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

DCSF Department for Children, Schools and Families …….1

DfE Department for Education …….....1

DfEE Department for Education and Employment ……..49

EMA Education Maintenance Allowance …….....14

ERA Education Reform Act …….....8

FSM Free School Meals ……..1

FSTE Financial Times Stock Exchange……150

GCSE General Certificate of Secondary Education …….....1

ILEA Inner London Education Authority …….....10

KNBS Kenya National Bureau of Statistics ……...16

LGBTQ Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer ……....145

NES National Education Service …….....5

NHS National Health Service …….....5

NUT National Union of Teachers ……51

OECD Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development …….. ...1

PISA Programme for International Student Assessment……...27

SID Society for International Development ……..16

UBI Universal Basic Income ……..123

Gen Z Generation Zoomers ……147

Chapter One – INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

1.1 A CLASSIST LANDSCAPE

Clearly one of the most economically unequal countries in the developed world (Piketty 2014; Wilkinson and Pickett 2009, 2019; Joyce and Xu 2019), the United Kingdom also ranks high in the list of OECD countries where the link between social class and education is most profound, and where class remains the strongest predictor of educational (under) achievement (OECD 2007; Perry and Francis 2010; Reay 2017). Not only has the educational failure of white working-class boys dominated social justice discourse in recent times (Cassen and Kingdon 2007; Demie and Lewis 2010), statistics also reveal that their plight is the fate of the majority of English children at all levels of education who are unlucky enough to hail from backgrounds of socio-economic disadvantage. For example, data obtained from the DCSF (2009) showed that at Key Stage 2, only 53.5 per cent of pupils eligible for free school meals (FSM) – a widely used measure of child poverty – reach the expected level (i.e. level 4 or above) in English and Mathematics, compared with 75.5 per cent of pupils who are not eligible. The same pattern can be seen at GCSE, where data indicates that barely a third of pupils eligible for FSM achieve five or more GCSEs at A*-C (9-4), including English and mathematics, against nearly two-thirds of other pupils (DfE 2012; Adams 2015).

This cosy relationship between socio-economic privilege and education is not only evident throughout the years of compulsory schooling but is amazingly replicated in the rates of participation and success in further and higher education. Here one comes face-to-face with the oft-cited scandalous situation of the privately educated 7 per cent of English school children taking up nearly half of all the places in the elite universities of Oxford and Cambridge (Guardian 2017). Even more revealing is the top social classes and affluent regions' sheer dominance of Oxbridge according to data recently obtained by David Lammy MP (BBC 2017).

The data reveals that four-fifths of students accepted at Oxbridge between 2010 and 2015 had parents with top professional and managerial jobs. Nationally, only about 31 per cent of people are in the top two income groups, but their fortune affords them a disproportionate share of Oxbridge offers rising from 79 per cent to 81 per cent between 2010 and 2015. Even regional economic power is reflected in this pattern. Compared to the disproportionately working-class north of England which in its entirety received only 16 per cent of Oxbridge offers, the significantly wealthier but smaller region of London and Southeast England received 48 per cent of the offers from these elite universities. Other data reveal that only 4 per cent of those eligible for FSM at age 15 continue to study at university, compared with 33 per cent of their peers (Harris 2010; Norris 2011). Such data vindicates Alison Wolf's (2000) view that expanding provision for education and training while leaving its structural hierarchy intact has done little to benefit the most vulnerable in society – those whom the general education system has failed.

1.2 EXPLAINING THE CLASS-GAP

Any concern about the significant class achievement gap that today characterises the English education system is really a concern about distributive justice – what is the 'just' way to allocate incoming educational opportunities? In other words, how may the class-gap in educational achievement be explained, and is it just? Two rival accounts of distributive justice may be recognised in response to this question (Smith 2012). Meritocratic explanations approach the question of distributive justice from the understanding of justice as desert (merit). Sympathetic to individualist accounts of educational inequality, such account argues that a just social arrangement is one in which the allocation of distributive shares is based on the effort people put in to merit them. As such, the class-gap is blamed on the 'deficits' of individuals and their families. They are lazy/unambitious, are lacking in natural talent or come from 'non-aspirational' home backgrounds (Perry and Francis 2010; Reay 2017). So, the class-gap is fair.

Those unable to do well in the school system just need to take more responsibility. Some evidence suggests that majority of the British public are today sympathetic to this conception of justice. A recent British Social Attitudes survey (Curtis 2010) and a YouGov (2011) poll found that British people, irrespective of class background, are today much less supportive of the welfare state and redistribution of wealth than in the 1980s, about 85 per cent of them believing that in a fair society income should depend on how hard people work and how talented they are.

Structural accounts of distributive justice, on the other hand, blame educational inequality on wider socio-economic inequalities and particular organisation of school systems that lie beyond the agency of the individual, and loosely categorise the explanation for the class-gap in terms of 'home' and 'school' factors (Bourdieu 1984; Mijs 2019; Smith 2012; Reay 2017). Though such structural distinction is usually dismissed as an attempt to simplify a complex social phenomenon which is clearly produced by the interface between the two factors (Webb et al 2015), it is clear that the egalitarian case considered by this research proposes a school factor intervention because it focuses on the 'injustice' perpetuated by hierarchical educational structures. Despite the complexity of the matter, the central point being advanced by the egalitarian educationist is that individuals have minimal or zero agency in determining educational outcomes. The unchosen 'home' and 'school' factors deliver that for them. As such, the class-gap is unfair. A school-focused structural intervention would go a long way in muting the power of 'home' originating privilege because of the evidence that the class-gap is more pronounced in steeply hierarchical school jurisdictions (Benn 2018; Wilkinson and Pickett 2009; Reay 2017).

The claim that society is structured such that the interface between class and education favours individuals from middle-class backgrounds was competently 'validated' by the French

sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002). Bourdieu explored the complex social process that leads to differential access to incoming social opportunities and used his trilogy of thinking tools – capital, field and habitus – to explain how the structure of the school *field* secures educational advantage for the middle-class – due to their superior possession of 'home' originated *capitals*, and their ability to define their culture as the valid *habitus* of the school *field*. In so doing, Bourdieu provide a framework for understanding the potential class-based injustices of the *field* of education.

The structural/egalitarian account of social justice is further legitimised by a growing number of epidemiologists and social scientists who warn of the health and social cost of uninterrupted structural reproduction of inequality (Case and Deaton 2020; Wilkinson and Pickett 2009, 2019; Sandel 2020; Monbiot 2017). Among them are Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett who, drawing on extensive international research, explain how a wide range of adverse health and social outcomes are correlated to inequality in ways that should concern us profoundly. Such evidence further validates the egalitarian proposal because of education's pivotal status as a reproducer/perpetuator of social inequality (Bourdieu 1986; Friedman et al 2016).

1.3 THE EGALITARIAN CASE

A number of egalitarians looking at the evidence of England's unequal educational landscape and its destructive consequences take the view that a classist provision is incompatible with the notions of a fair society, and root, not for stopgap interventions that simply tinker with a neoliberally conceived education system, but a complete dismantling of structures that perpetuate classism (Perry and Francis 2010; Reay 2017; Benn 2018). Anchoring their reform proposal on the 'injustice' of the structure of the English school system, they advocate levelling the school *field* as crucial to eradicating the system's classism. Egalitarians are not blind to the power of wider socio-economic inequalities in securing educational advantage for the middle

and upper classes (Ball 2010; Reay 2017; Benn 2018), but argue that the 'common school' they advocate would not only go a long way in mitigating the effect of such advantage, but would also secure Britain its prized 'fair society' tag (Perry and Francis 2010). Below is how key egalitarians articulate the case for a fully-integrated school system in England.

Arguing that 'a neoliberal socially just education is a contradiction in terms' and building on the work of the philosopher R.H. Tawney, Diane Reay, conceptualises a socially just education as embodying 'the establishment of the completest possible education equality' (2012, p.587). Such a system, which she identifies in the Finnish education system, must be devoid of steep hierarchical structures like private schools that perpetuate and reproduce socio-economic privilege. In her latest book, *Miseducation: Inequality, education and the working classes*, Reay (2017), while depicting heart-wrenching class inequalities in the English education system with rich statistics and rigorous empirical data, examines the different aspects of working-class people's experiences of education, and movingly critiques the English education system's inherent structural inequality and its damaging human consequences. Agreeing with Reay that a lasting solution lies in a structural intervention, Perry and Francis (2010) highlight the impotence of various governmental and philanthropic initiatives that have sought to tackle the class-gap in educational access/participation/success, and recommend, among other things, replacing individualist/deficit narratives of working-class failure with structural accounts of educational inequality. On her part, Melissa Ben (2018) reminds us that the egalitarian ideal is really the vision encapsulated in the notion of the NHS-style 'cradle-to-grave' National Education Service (NES) recently put forward in the 2017/2019 Labour Party manifestos. In her latest book, *Life Lessons: The Case for a National Education Service,* Benn argues that a fully-integrated comprehensive system is the surest way to eliminating the class attainment gap and securing a fair society. She explains how a steeply hierarchical post-war Finnish education, like the English one, evolved from a divisive class-layered system (made up of private,

selective and less-well-regarded 'local' schools), to become a system in which every child attends the 'common school'. This enabled Finland not only to close the attainment gap between the richest and the poorest students, but also to turn into one of the global educational success stories of the modern era. Benn argues that this was only possible because Finland's politicians and education figures recognised that a profoundly unequal education system did not simply reproduce inequality down the generations but also weakened the fabric of the nation itself.

For Louise Archer et al (2010) and Nicola Ingram (2009) the injustice of the current hierarchical arrangement is compounded by the fact that it has enabled the metamorphosis of the English school system into a culturally middle-class domain, a *field* in which only middle-class values are valorised. A segregated system in which the middle-class are the only winners, they argue, gives them the power and the legitimacy to define their habitus as superior and to impose it on the education system. As a result, schools put a higher value on middle-class tastes and preferences, leading to working-class pupils experiencing the world of education as alien and unnatural, and to their educational failure. The subtlety of cultural capital and the audacity of those possessing it to use it to their advantage in *fields* like education is highlighted by a new generation of Bourdieusian researchers (Thatcher et al 2017), who in their book *Bourdieu, The Next Generation,* apply Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital to contemporary issues. One of them, Derron Wallace (2017), draws on the notion of black cultural capital[1] and explores how second-generation black Caribbean boys and girls in a south London secondary school, who despite struggling with education, use black cultural capital to garner higher status and social recognition, and prove authenticity. It is the kind of unhealthy competition and social put-downs which is incensed by neoliberal policies like league tables and standardised tests, and

[1] Black capital is a set of resources black Caribbean youth deploy to make meaning of black identities, forge networks of belonging and counter their marginal status, given Britain's racialised power relations.

which Reay (2017) argues reduces those unable to compete in the education *field* to worthless individuals who have to seek legitimacy by all means or be sucked into oblivion. In the final analysis, it is the fact that England's segregated education system reproduces and perpetuates social inequality that should concern us profoundly. Providing evidence that inequality is the 'elephant in the room' in this debate because of its corrosive and divisive consequences, Wilkinson and Pickett in their books, *The Spirit Level: Why Equality is Better for Everyone* (2009), and *The Inner Level: How More Equal Societies Reduce Stress, Restore Sanity and Improve Everyone's Well-being* (2019), predicate the realisation of a socially just society on a fundamental restructuring of social institutions (such as education and the economy) that reproduce and perpetuate inequality. Warning that inequality threatens the very fabric of society, they diagnose suffocating inequality in all its forms. Wilkinson and Pickett's account, which highlights the 'causal' relationship between inequality and the quality of the social environment, has not just found allies in the bastions of neoliberalism such as IMF (Lagarde 2015) and World Bank (2019), it also echoes R.H. Tawney's reservations with a neoliberal conception of social justice expressed over half-a-century ago. Tawney (1964) defined a socially just society as one that can call itself a community rather than being comprised of competing fractions with very unequal distributions of social and economic power:

> Social well-being depends upon cohesion and solidarity. It implies the existence, not merely of opportunities to ascend, but of a high level of general culture, and a strong sense of common interests, and a diffusion throughout society of a conviction that civilization is not the business of an elite alone, but a common enterprise which is the concern of all (p.108).

1.3.1 Classist structures

The structures widely identified by egalitarian educationists as typifying the hierarchical English school *field* and facilitating educational advantage for the middle and upper classes include independent schools in the private-sector, and all forms of segregated provision within

the grant-maintained[2] and open state sectors, including, but not limited to, setting and streaming, school choice and school diversification. Private schools are identified for abolishment because the egalitarian educationist deems them a 'principal means by which elitism and social divisions are reproduced and perpetuated in England' (Reay 2012, p.591). Their superior education, for example, accords the 7 per cent of English children who they educate disproportionate access to the super-elite universities of Oxford and Cambridge, and is the chief means through which the upper classes monopolise high-status occupations (Friedman et al 2016; Pells 2016; Sutton Trust and Social Mobility Commission 2019). And, because the grant-maintained sector replicates the hierarchy and elitism of private schools through the restrictions they impose on entry, they too need to go according to the proposal. Argues Reay (2017) against these two provision types: 'the existence of both a private sector and a selective grant-maintained sector funded by the state completely undermines comprehensivisation and is hard to reconcile with the principle of social justice' (p.46).

As for the open or mainstream state sector, the main structural element earmarked for eradication is the endemic setting and streaming which makes white middle-class children in socially mixed schools mostly educated separately in top sets away from their black and white working-class peers (Gillborn and Youdell 2000). Key too is the skill differential that comes with the highly-celebrated market mechanisms of school choice and school diversity, core elements of the 1988 Education Reform Act (ERA) which, though are the main drivers of the 'standards' agenda (Gewirtz 1995; Cullinane et al. 2017), are today the key agents of classism. Reay (2012) faults them for facilitating a system where the working-class largely end up with 'choices' that the middle class do not want to make.

[2] Faith, foundation, trust schools, academies and free schools.

Chapter three explores the injustice perpetuated by these school structures in more detail, therein lying the justification for their removal.

1.3.2 Focus on class

This research understands 'social class' in the Bourdieusian sense, i.e., as extending above and beyond Marx's literal economic understanding into the more symbolic realm of culture. Bourdieu (1984) had argued that social space is structured by the distribution of various forms of these symbolic elements or capitals (monetary assets, skills, tastes, posture, clothing, mannerisms, credentials and connections, etc, viz: cultural, social and economic capital) whose accumulation determines inclusion or exclusion from society. The distinction of social groups into, for example, middle-class and working-class is determined by the extent of possession of these symbolic elements. It is these economic, social and cultural capitals that research (*see* chapter three) shows confer competitive advantage to those in their possession in social *fields* such as educational. As shown in chapter two, it is this Bourdieusian lens that provides the framework on which class is understood in this research. And, it is this broader understanding of class that informed the attempt to operationalise it via stakeholder background elements such as *stakeholder type*, *school type* and *region* – the assumption being that association with certain school types (*private, open comprehensive,* etc), having certain statuses in society (*teacher, parent, pupil*) or hailing from certain regions (*north west* or *south east* of England) may signal the likelihood or not of being in possession of certain capitals or of harbouring certain views (inclinations or *habituses*) on the issue of an integrated school system. Teachers in England, for example, are usually assumed to belong to middle-class due to a number of attributes, including but not limited to, level of income or educational qualifications, the social status of their profession, etc. Pupils too may be said to belong a class by virtue of a unique *habitus,* especially given the broad exposure to variety of lifestyles, identities and cultures, that the age of information and globalisation confers on them. This means that I understand social class in

terms of relationship; not just economic relationships, but as a much broader web of social relationships, including those of style, educational experiences and patterns of residence (Bradley 1996; Reay 2017)

The egalitarian 'biased' focus on class is driven by the conviction that social class is a key source of the yawning structural divide in the English education system. So, unless urgent and far-reaching action is taken to eradicate class-based inequalities in education, other inequalities (like gender, race and disabilities), which evidence suggests it tramps, or are inextricably intermeshed with it, cannot be fully addressed (Perry and Francis 2010, Reay 2012). Say Perry and Francis (2010) of the primacy of class in attainment:

> Social class remains the strongest predictor of educational achievement in the UK where the social class gap for educational achievement is one of the most significant in the developed world…Statistics have highlighted that British children's educational attainment is overwhelmingly linked to parental occupation, income, and qualifications (p.1)

For Reay (2012), what warrants an unapologetic focus on class is that despite it being key to the realisation of a socially just education, it is one area of educational inequality that has been marginalized in the contemporary focus on diversity in Britain. She explains that even the Inner London Education Authority (ILEA), the bastion of equal opportunities in education throughout the 1970s and 1980s, never managed to produce guidelines on social class to accompany its 1985 and 1986 impressive documents on race and gender[3]. More recently in November 2010, adds Reay, Theresa May scrapped the socio-economic duty from the monumental Equalities Act. This duty demanded that public bodies consider the impact of policy on people from poorer backgrounds, in the same way they currently need to consider the impact of policy decisions on women, minorities and disabled people. Without fully

[3] ILEA's progressive documents on gender and race were: the 1985 Anti-sexist and the 1986 Anti-racist statements.

addressing class-based educational inequality, argues Reay, the 'establishment of the completest possible educational equality' (p.587) will remain elusive, which is a disaster for efforts to tackle wider socio-economic inequalities, especially, at a time when epidemiologists are warning about the health and social costs of inequality (Wilkinson and Pickett 2009, 2019). The urgency of structurally dealing with the sources of class-based inequality like education is also underscored by the current political turmoil plaguing Western democracies. Egalitarian commentators (Sandel 2020; Monbiot 2017) are increasingly blaming Brexit and the rise of far-right populism across the West on the inability of neoliberal policies to spread the benefits of free-market capitalism and globalisation to the masses, and on the narrative that justifies inequality as meritocratically deserved.

Closely linked to inequality's legacy of an unstable social fabric is perhaps what proponents of a fully-integrated education system in England dread most: a national service operating as a tool for reproducing an elite club of political rulers and economically successful men and women who believe that they have merited their success, and are increasingly adopting market solutions to every social and moral issue (Sandel 2012, 2020). Their commitment to market solutions constitutes what Amartya Sen (1992) calls 'exclusionary neglect' of the voices of the masses who are arbitrarily excluded from the elite club of political rulers or top professionals, but whose lives are affected by the decisions the club takes. Such allegiance to market 'technocracy' too being the source of the populist backlash that typifies the current volatile political climate plaguing Western market democracies (Sandel 2020).

1.3.3 Notions of a 'fair' society

It is also the contention of egalitarian educationists that policy makers should be concerned about the fact that the socio-economic gap in educational achievement in England remains wide and intractable because it negates notions of a fair society (Reay 2017; Norris 2011; Perry and

Francis 2010). While acknowledging that the class-gap is a widespread international phenomenon, they point out that the UK has a particularly high degree of social segregation and is one of the nations with the most highly differentiated results among OECD countries (OECD 2007, 2013). Such clear connection between poverty and educational failure, they argue, is problematic to the notions of a 'fair society', a tag that the UK is known to prize[4] (DfE 2012). Fair societies have egalitarian education systems which promote a socially mobile citizenry, which in turn is good for growth, democracy, social welfare and trust (Piketty 2014; Reay 17; Benn 2018). Egalitarian advocates like Reay and Benn identify Finland as such fair society. In the Finnish education system, they see the closest pragmatic expression of R.H. Tawney's 'common school', an arrangement that is neither an accomplice to social inequality perpetuation nor a prize to be competitively fought over. Core to the Finnish system, opines Reay (2012), is the absence of the neoliberal economic vision of education with its characteristic prescriptive external accountability and standardisation regimes. Unlike in the UK where family background dictates those for whom education is a success, in Finland all children thrive. Reay (2012) explains that such success is possible despite Finland operating a system in which virtually all children enroll in identical comprehensive schools, which offer equal educational opportunities to everyone irrespective of locality, gender, financial situation, or cultural background.

It is fair to say that the notion of a 'fair society' and the central role of education in enabling its realisation is core to contemporary UK social policy. This is expressed below in extracts from speeches of recent British political leaders:

> To those who say, 'where is Labour's passion for social justice?' I say education is social justice. Education is liberty. Education is opportunity. (Blair 1997)

[4] That the UK defines and prides itself as a fair society is most visible in the Fundamental British Values agenda, delineated as 'democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect, and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs'(DfE 2012, p.10).

> Education is the greatest liberator mankind has ever known, and the greatest force for social progress. (Brown 2007)
>
> Without good education there can be no social justice. (Cameroon 2007, p.84)

The consensus across the political divide seems to be that education is key to reducing social inequality and building a just society. In fact, the only element where there is no consensus between the political-Right and the political-Left in this area is whether the state should intervene to enable social justice. Whereas Right-wing parties emphasise individual responsibility in making the most of available opportunities, those on the Left emphasise the crucial role of the state in ensuring that people's educational experiences and outcomes are fair (Smith 2012).

Yet, despite the policy concern and myriad policy initiatives aimed at eradicating the class-gap, policy makers have equally acknowledged its intractability (Perry and Francis 2010). As Stephen Ball (2010) puts it, 'as far as social inequality is concerned, education policy is not working, or not working very well' (p.155). The intractability of this problem found blunt and emotive expression in the former Education Secretary Michael Gove's address of a Commons education committee: 'rich, thick kids' do better than poor, 'clever' children before they even start school (Shepherd 2010a). Though this language was rejected by the unions, it was later clear in his speech to the Conservative Party conference that he was concerned about deep-seated inequality in the system that, for example, translates into more young people from the independent school Westminster alone attending the 'best' universities than the entire cohort of children on FSM (Gove 2010). His Conservative Party colleague, the former Prime Minister, Theresa May, made tackling this problem a policy priority by making a strong reference to it in her first speech as prime minister (May 2016), and following it up with her grammar schools' agenda (May 2017), albeit, rather haphazardly. Though the proposal to bring back selection was rejected by many in the egalitarian community, May argued that a new generation of

grammar schools will decisively contribute to the building of a Great Meritocracy within the British education system by replacing selection by mortgage with selection by merit, thereby enabling children from ordinary working families to have the chances their richer contemporaries take for granted.

1.3.4 Stopgap interventions

The acknowledgement of the intractability of the class-gap by policy-makers coincides with the view taken by many in the egalitarian community (Dyson et al 2010; Perry and Francis 2010; Reay 2012) that current interventions are not sufficient or effective in closing the class-gap, especially, because they are being 'grafted' onto a fundamentally unequal education system. Of specific interest is Reay's (2012) charge that the problem lies in the English education system's inability to mute the power of money in buying educational advantage. This, she argues, is propped by the empty rhetoric of meritocracy, which has succeeded in diverting attention from powerful structures and created the false consciousness that individuals only have themselves to blame for their inability to make wise choices and succeed in a fair educational environment.

It is holding on to 'falsehoods' like the 'meritocratic myth' that egalitarian researchers believe encourages the reluctance to go for a permanent structural overhaul (Monbiot 2017; Sayer 2015) and inspires the continued grafting of temporary and lukewarm interventions onto a fundamentally unequal education system (Perry and Francis 2010). The temporary nature of these interventions, for example, is evident in the fact that they are usually abandoned by successive governments (or otherwise) before their impact is even possible to evaluate. For example, some of the flagship New Labour education policies did not see the light of day when the Coalition Government took power in 2010. The Coalition Government cancelled the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) in England as part of public spending cuts – some

say, against professional advice on the adverse impact of the move on poor students (Norris 2011) and, even though by 2010 there were around 3,500 local Sure-Start centres with all children in the most disadvantaged areas having access to one, from 2011 there have been significant spending cuts to Sure-Start funding leading to the closure of many centres (Webb et al. 2015). Regarding their inability to target systemic injustice because of their lukewarm nature, one may refer to New Labour's raising aspirations of working-class young people initiative. This policy has been accused of individualising the problem of class disadvantage. By locating the 'problem' exclusively with working-class young people and their families, it propagates deficit narratives of working-class failure while ignoring the issues around socio-economic capital and structural aspects of the education system that mitigate against both achievement and 'aspiration' (Perry and Francis 2010).

It is not clear why policy makers have not implemented the seemingly noble suggestion of a fully integrated system given the overwhelming evidence of educational inequality and its adverse effects on society, but have instead opted for stopgap interventions. Some suspect that because of the predominantly neoliberal tendencies of British education policy-making[5] and the senior age of segregated provision[6], national leaders fear public wrath on even being identified with this apparently socialist proposal in a country which Diane Reay (2017) believes is today more Thatcherite than when Margaret Thatcher was in office.

1.4 THE RESEARCH

This research put to the opinion of educational stakeholders the egalitarian proposal for a structurally integrated school system as a sure way to stopping education aiding the reproduction and closure of socio-economic privilege in England. Because of the cross-

[5] Despite slight differences in approach, all the three main parties support a marketized education system.
[6] Segregated provision is as old as the British education itself, from a middle-class only education before the industrial revolution, through to the tripartite system from 1944, to the current 'pseudo-comprehensive' schooling from 1965.

sectional nature of the respondents engaged, and the regional balancing factored into the research design, I believed that the views of stakeholders would signal the trend of public opinion on this debate, thereby contributing an important voice in shaping policy direction. The only key stakeholder I did not engage is the national policy-makers or politicians. This is because their view is in the public domain. The main policies pursued by the three main UK political parties while in government (e.g. the tripartite system, 'pseudo-comprehensive' schooling and marketisation policies) have largely been neoliberal in character and have mainly influenced structures that perpetuate educational inequality.

The rationale of this research was founded on the view that in a liberal democracy of the 21st Century, policy-making, while increasingly assuming what Michael Sandel (2018) calls a 'neoliberal technocratic turn'[7], should primarily reflect public opinion, which should be sought not only at elections, but also whenever major changes in social structures are contemplated or proposed. Consequently, I felt it important that this long-held academic perspective on the structure of schooling is put to stakeholder opinion. Crucial too was the evidence that economic inequality is causally linked to social fragmentation (Wilkinson and Pickett 2009) and ecological breakdown (Monbiot 2017; Hickel 2021), thereby necessitating the need to engage 'members of the public' on the plight of social structures (like the education system) which research shows perpetuate and reproduce such inequality (Bourdieu 1986; Reay 2017). Moreover, I was inspired by the Deweyan conviction that democratic cultures or institutions should be a product of a ground-up application of principles and practices extracted from the shared experiences and problems of all the segments of the society that compose the public to whom and for whom democracy operates, and not just of 'experts' (Dewey 1916).

[7] *Neoliberal turn* – the faith in market mechanisms as the primary instruments for achieving the public good. *Technocratic turn* – the tendency of governing elites to treat ideologically contestable questions as if they were a matter of economic efficiency, the province of experts.

I chose to focus on this area of social justice out of what Silverman (2010) calls a sense of social obligation to make a contribution or a difference. Myself a product of Kenya's unequal education system (KNBS 2017) where material disadvantage almost ended my formal schooling, I have grown to identify with social justice in education, not in the instrumental neoliberal sense, but in terms of the more egalitarian social democratic tradition like that articulated by John Rawls' formulation of distributive justice (Rawls 1971). Rawls' principles of justice call for, among others, addressing social and economic inequalities so that the greatest benefits accrue to the least advantaged. The main impulse driving my research interest and advocacy in this area of social justice is a feeling that my bumpy educational path would have been smoother had Kenyan authorities been more willing to tackle the structural barriers that made/make educational access/success largely a preserve of those with economic capital (KNBS and SID 2013). Of course, as Reay (2017) puts it, this passionate partiality, while helpful in ensuring a strong and empathetic focus on social justice, can also result in over-simplification of the complex relationship between class and education, or over-identification with the views of those disadvantaged by the education system. To this end, I committed to be guided by the evidence, for I believed it possible that English educational stakeholders are against what I, influenced by my background, consider a noble proposal. I was open to the possibility that Dennis Marsden (1971) was right when he argued in his *Fabian Society* booklet that it is difficult to sell the idea of 'common schools' to an electorate that had shown itself to be largely indifferent to the social divisiveness of the education system.

The research questions that guided this enquiry was:

- **RQ1:** What is stakeholder response to the egalitarian proposed structural integration of the English school system as a precursor to eradicating classism in the English education system?

- **RQ1.2**: Are there regional/school/stakeholder-type differences in such response? If so, how could they be explained?
- **RQ1.3**: What is the significance for educational reform and wider socio-economic inequalities of these stakeholder responses to the idea of egalitarian education?

Chapter Two – THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Two theoretical perspectives offer a useful lens in understanding: i) how socio-economic background and steeply hierarchical educational structures can have a cosy relationship, and ii) why we should be concerned about unabated structural reproduction of inequality. Pierre Bourdieu's theory of practice offers a competent insight into the former, explaining how the trilogy of *capital, habitus* and *field* interact to produce social privilege. Epidemiologists Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett's theory, on the other hand, underlines the health and social cost of wayward inequality in explaining the latter. Because frameworks like these highlight the relationship between structure and agency, they provide social researchers with essential thinking tools that give insight into how structural inequalities determine access to the good life. In the context of education, and specifically of this research, both frameworks explain, not only how social structures allow morally arbitrary factors such as class to dictate access to educational opportunities (Friedman et al 2016; Reay 2017), but also why we should be concerned about the corrosive and divisive effect of economic inequality on individuals and society, and the role of educational inequality in reproducing and perpetuating it (Sandel 2020; Monbiot 2017).

2.1 HOW educational inequality is reproduced and perpetuated

Bourdieusian human capital framework, or rather his theory of practice, is based on an attempt to bridge structure and agency. It can be read as a part reaction and part compromise to the rigid determinism of structuralism, and the firmament agency advocated by phenomenology (Burke 2016). In what is referred to as a structural constructivist position, Bourdieu occupies a middle ground and presents an interpretative account of structure and agency aided by three essential relational concepts, dubbed his central thinking tools, viz. *capital*, *habitus* and *field.* In schematic form he provides a simplistic but concise account of how these three conceptual tools operate: [(habitus) (capital)] + field = practice (1984, p.101). This formula has been the

foundation for the application of Bourdieusian social theory. It expresses Bourdieu's view that habitus and capital interact together within a dynamic context, engendering practice or strategic agency.

Bourdieu understood *capital* as particular resources that individuals have access to, which can be invested or exchanged for goods. Heavily influenced by Karl Marx, Bourdieu, like Marx, argues that capital forms the foundation of social life and dictates one's position within the social order. As such, the more capital one has, the more powerful a position one occupies in social life. The position within social space an individual occupies will affect objective issues such as status, life chances and experiences. It will also affect levels of aspiration and expectations, what Bourdieu refers to as the 'field of possibilities' (1984, p. 110). Anxious for his readers to move beyond a literal economic understanding of capital, Bourdieu extended Marx's idea of capital beyond the economic into the more symbolic realm of culture. For him, therefore, capital also includes the collection of symbolic elements such as skills, tastes, posture, clothing, mannerisms, credentials and connections, that one acquires through being part of a particular social class. As such, Bourdieu argues that social space is structured by the distribution of the various forms of capital whose accumulation determines inclusion or exclusion from society.

In *Distinction*, Bourdieu (1984) identifies three main forms of capital: economic, cultural, social. Economic capital refers to access to material or financial resources – income, wealth and monetary assets. Social capital, on the other hand, is the network of social contacts – who you know and how you use your contacts to your advantage. It is resources based on connections and group membership; that is, capital with value through relationships. Bourdieu defines cultural capital as 'instruments for the appropriation of symbolic wealth socially designated as worthy of being sought and possessed' (1977, p.488). The 'instruments' or

resources Bourdieu refers to include cultural cues, social styles, schemes of expression, acquired bodies of knowledge, (re)presentations of styles, manners of speaking, consumption practices and patterns (Reay 2004). Elsewhere, Bourdieu (1986) refers to cultural capital as high culture: that is, culture that has been legitimised through middle-class acknowledgement. The legitimation of cultural resources connected to middle-class lifestyles makes middle-class culture a type of capital because, like wealth, it gives competitive advantage to those who possess it in *fields* such as education. By contrast, conventional interpretations of cultural capital promote deficit perspectives of what the working classes lack in their negotiation of inter-group class relations (Carter 2003). This explains why working-class culture is devalued by schools as 'rough' and inferior and supposedly lacking in aspirations (Ingram 2009). For Bourdieu (1984), therefore, it was capital that removed the element of chance from the games we play; it 'decides' the path not taken.

As stated earlier, the other two thinking tools in the Bourdieusian trilogy are *habitus* and *field*. Bourdieu (1977) defines *habitus* as the mind-set that being part of a culture generates. It is the dispositions or learned, taken-for-granted ways of thinking, being and acting that are shared by a particular social group. According to Bourdieu (1986), habitus is formed and directed by a number of different influences, with family and the education system being the two most influential forces. And, while habitus is unique to each individual, Bourdieu (2002) argues that its extrapolation is legitimised through the argument that individuals from similar backgrounds/locations will have been exposed to a similar environment, leading to an increased chance that their habitus will be similar. Like capital, habitus affects one's social status and their ability to compete in social *fields* like education because the norms, values or dispositions 'acquired in the family underlies the structuring of school experiences' (Bourdieu 1977, p.87).

Finally, the concept of *field* can be read as an active and dynamic site in which habitus and capital interact. According to Thompson (2008), the French term Bourdieu used for *field* was *le champ* (meaning battlefield), rather than *le pre* (a calm and conciliatory environment). As such, it should be understood as a site of competition and aggression in which an individual or group is required to negotiate, their ability to maneuver within a particular field and win or lose the battle for resources and status influenced by habitus and capital (Thatcher et al 2016). According to Bourdieu, 'agents take the advantage of the possibilities offered by a field to express and satisfy their drives and desires…or fields use the agents' drives by forcing them to subject or sublimate themselves in order to adapt to their structures and to the ends that are immanent within them' (2000, p.165).

Bourdieu's theory of practice is a useful framework for this research mainly because it competently explains the structural position on which the egalitarian proposal hinges. As such, it sharpens our understanding of how access to incoming educational opportunities favours some individuals and not others. Such structural account of educational inequality takes the view that what secures middle-class individuals educational advantage is not some detached agency (e.g. they are not necessarily more hard-working or talented), but the interface between their largely 'unchosen' privileged socio-economic circumstances and the structure of schooling. As such, Bourdieu validates the egalitarian view that the more steeply hierarchical the school *field* is, the more unequal educational outcomes are for individuals possessing varied levels of *capital*.

It will be interesting to see if respondents share in this Bourdieusian/structural account of educational inequality or whether they are wedded to the more intuitive individualist/meritocratic account of social justice which research shows today pervades England (Curtis 2010; YouGov 2011; Mijs 2019). Indeed, as mentioned in chapters one and

four, the debate on the true sources of the (in)justice of the class-gap, of which Bourdieusian 'structuralism' is a key perspective, influenced the coding of the reasons for stakeholder opinion into *structural* and *meritocratic* accounts of social justice. Because this research is technically about engaging stakeholders opinion on the (in)justice of the structure of schooling, I deemed possible that some stakeholders would identify with the Bourdieusian/egalitarian understanding of schooling as a classed *field* in which what delivers success is possession of 'home'-originated capitals and 'school'-validated habitus (*the structural account*), or that some stakeholders would see the school system as a fair structure in which what gives the edge in the acquisition of opportunities is certain attributes of the individual (*meritocratic account*).

Because the debate on the real sources of educational inequality presupposes a complex interface between class and education, I suspected that stakeholder opinion might be varied according to the extent of their possessions of *capital* and the nature of their *habitus*, both also determining the kind of educational structure they are associated with in the steeply hierarchical English educational *field*. This informed the decision to engage stakeholders of different socio-economic backgrounds, operationalised by *region* and *school-type*, and the analysis of their perpectives using such *background* as shown in chapter five. As such, Bourdieu's thinking tools enabled me to make sense of stakeholder responses by helping focus on certain attributes of the respondents or the way the educational *field* is constructed by the state and understood by society. Take, for example, the structural claim that inherited cultural capital is validated by the education system (Ingram 2009; Archer et al 2007). Whereas Bourdieu (1986) argues it is a contributory factor to the reproduction of social positions in favour of the middle-class, egalitarian commentators, like Perry and Francis (2010), Reay (2017), and Welshman (2007) point out that policy response by successive UK governments and institutions for many decades to this clear structural opposition to working-class culture, has been a successful deficit discourse focused on the 'righting' of the 'bad culture' of the poor neighbourhood. Given the

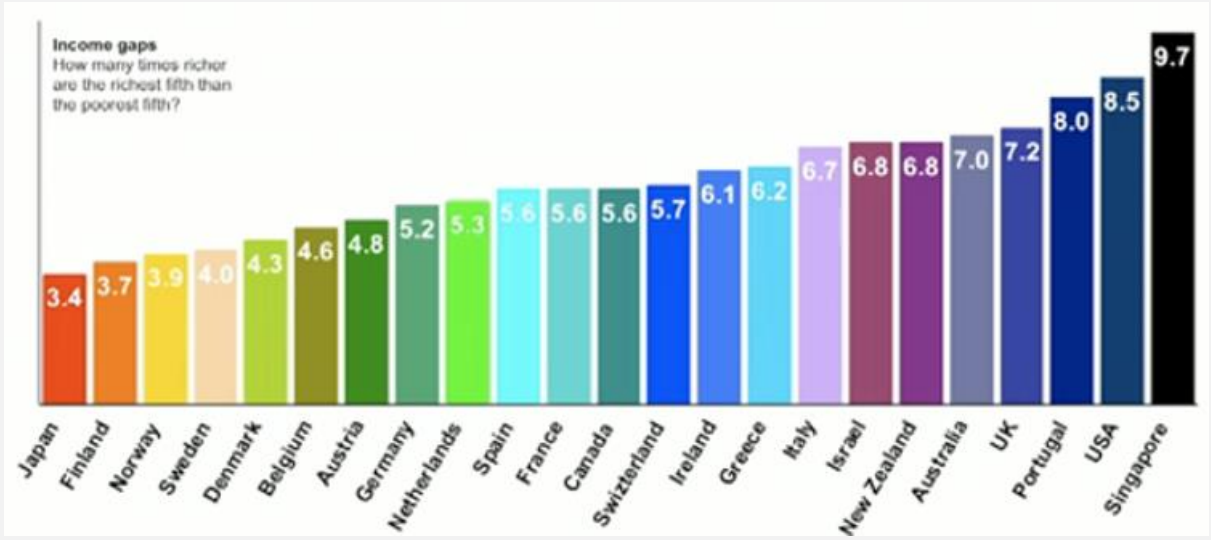
power of the state in influencing social narratives, this research deemed it possible that this long-held policy bias, anchored on neoliberal accounts of social justice, could influence stakeholder opinion on the sources of educational inequality away from the egalitarian structural account. This could mean that my suspicion about varied stakeholder opinion, which informed the decision to engage different stakeholder types, may not depend on their middle-class or working-class *habituses*. For as Thatcher and Halvorsrud (2016) explain, there is such a thing as a national habitus, meaning that stakeholder views on hierarchical educational structures might not be class-bound but trans-habitus. Reay (2017) explains, for example, that the attempt to explain working-class educational failure as a cultural deficit has today assumed a trans-habitus status. The narrative that: 'they lack aspiration, don't support their children enough, let them watch too much TV…' (p.24) is so pervasive that even the working-class blame themselves for their inability to do well at school.

2.2 WHY tackle (educational) inequality

As for the urgency in tackling structures (like the education system) that perpetuate and/or reproduce socio-economic inequality, epidemiologists Wilkinson and Pickett (2009, 2019) demonstrate that inequality is psychologically corrosive, socially divisive and environmentally unsustainable. In their ground-breaking works, *Spirit Level: Why Equality is Better for Everyone* (2009), and *The Inner Level: How More Equal Societies Reduce Stress, Restore Sanity and Improve Everyone's Well-being* (2019), the duo provide compelling evidence indicating that the neoliberal legacy of unfettered socio-economic inequalities in the rich developed world has proven to be psycho-socially damaging. Countries with high levels of inequality (like the USA and UK), though rich, are most plagued by health and social problems, ranging from the 'level of trust, mental illness (including drug and alcohol addiction), life expectancy and infant mortality, obesity, children's educational performance, teenage births, homicides, imprisonment rates and

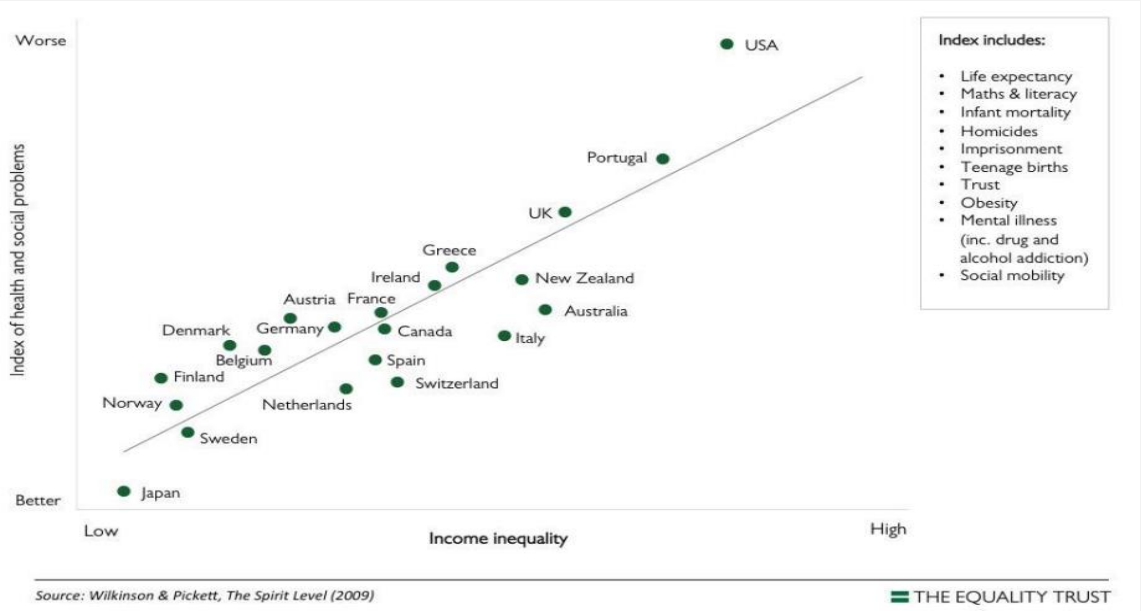
social mobility' (2009, p.19). As shown in *fig. 2.1* below, within more equal countries such as Japan and some of the Scandinavian countries at the left of the chart, the richest 20 per cent are less than four times as rich as the poorest 20 per cent. At the right of the chart are the more unequal countries (USA, UK, Singapore and Portugal) in which these differences are at least twice as big.

Fig. 2.1: **How much richer are the richest 20% than the poorest 20%**



Analysing the data on health and social problems in these rich modern market democracies, Wilkinson and Pickett report that 'almost all problems which are more common at the bottom of the social ladder are more common in more unequal countries' (2009, p. 18). In what they believe to be a causal relationship (*fig. 2.2*), they highlight the tendency for health and social problems which have steep social class gradients (are more common further down the social hierarchy) to occur less frequently in more equal countries. In other words, inequality damages the health and wellbeing of unequal countries, harms their social cohesion, and acts as a break on their economic performance.

Fig. 2.2: **Health and social problems are worse in more unequal countries**

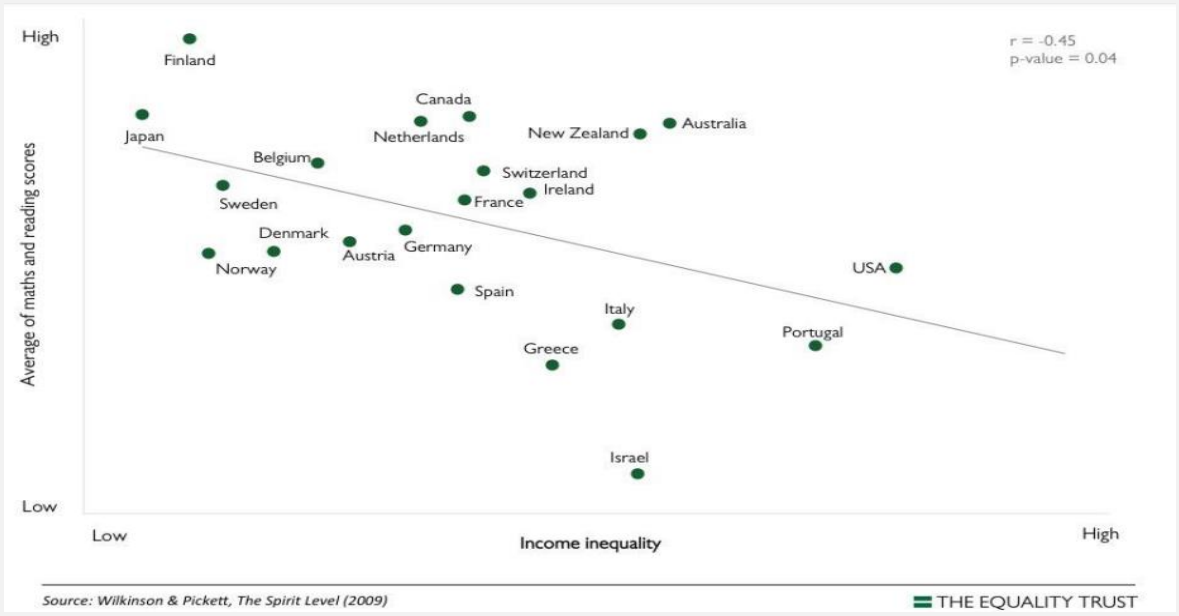


Wilkinson and Pickett (2009) argue that because these health and social problems are prevalent even in the world's biggest economies (e.g. USA and UK), it is clear that they are not caused by the society not being rich enough but by the scale of material differences between people within each society being too big. 'Where income differences are bigger, social distances are bigger and social stratification more important' (p.27). Accordingly, material inequalities matter because they provide 'the skeleton or framework, round which class and cultural differences are formed' (p.28), thereby explaining why inequality is divisive. This is because given that gradients in health and social problems reflect social status differences in culture and behaviour, 'crude differences in wealth gradually become overlaid by differences in clothing, aesthetic taste, education, sense of self and all the other markers of class identity' (p.28). Drawing on Dickerson and Kemeny's (2004) research, Wilkinson and Pickett explain that human beings are particularly sensitive to inequality because living in unequal societies drives them to preserve the social self and be vigilant to social evaluative threats – threats that may jeopardize their self-esteem or social status. This is because greater inequality heightens people's social evaluation anxieties by increasing the importance of social status. The increased

anxieties are to do with how people see us, what they think of us or how negatively they could judge our performance, leading to a kind of a defensive attempt to shore up confidence (insecure egotism or narcissism). This explains the ever-increasing cachet to being rich and the shame associated with being poor, as money – and what one does with it – becomes ever more important to social status. Wilkinson and Pickett argue that the anxiety and stress associated with maintaining a successful face in unequal societies is amplified by the fact that social hierarchy is often seen as if it were a ranking of the human race by ability, making the outward markers of success or failure (the better jobs, higher incomes, education, housing, car and clothes) make all the difference. 'Higher status almost always carries connotations of being better, superior, more successful and more able' (2009, p.40). Those who lack status in such environment of intense social comparison 'feel small, incapable, looked down on or inferior' (2009, p.40).

An adverse social outcome identified by Wilkinson and Pickett (2009) as correlated to inequality, and which is worth mentioning here, is poor educational performance. The duo present evidence drawn from international educational scores (such as those published by the Programme for International Student Assessment, PISA) indicating that more unequal countries have worse educational attainment (*fig. 2.3*). Compared to more equal countries like Finland and Belgium, unequal countries like USA and Portugal are not only characterised by a steeper social gradient in educational achievement, they also perform worse in international educational tests.

Fig. 2.3: **Educational scores are higher in more equal rich countries**



Though the PISA 2003 report (*fig. 2.3*) has no data for the UK as too few schools agreed to take part, Wilkinson and Pickett use the work of Benn and Millar (2006) to argue that the biggest problem facing British education is the enormous material disparity in children's home backgrounds and the associated social and cultural capital they bring to the education field.

> Children do better if their parents have higher incomes and more education themselves, and they do better if they come from homes where they have a place to study, where there are reference books and newspapers, and where education is valued (p.105).

Concluding that inequality is bad for everyone, Wilkinson and Pickett recommend as a solution to this existential problem facing liberal democracies, a systemic response that would root out inequality and all its sources, rather than the usual policy tendency to treat these health and social problems as if they were quite separate from one another, each needing separate services and individual remedies and treatments. This means that if a country wants higher average level of educational achievement among its school children, it must address the underlying inequality which creates steeper social gradient in educational achievement, rather than, for example, hire more teachers or tinker with the curriculum.

Like Bourdieu, Wilkinson and Pickett offer a structural account of social justice, further validating the view that adverse social outcomes are a consequence of the unequal structure of society. Their view that inequality is 'causally' linked to health and social problems strengthens the egalitarian contention that systemic measures should urgently be undertaken to stop education aiding an unhealthy and unstable social environment. As such, it is one of the views that consolidated my decision to code the reasons for stakeholder opinion into *structural* and *meritocratic* accounts of social justice as shown in chapter five. My choice of the latter theme, to which Wilkinson and Pickett attribute the justification for wayward inequality, was also influenced by the evidence that Britain is increasingly a liberal democracy in which support for individualist accounts of social inequality outweighs those for structural ones (Curtis 2010; YouGov 2011; Mijs 2019). It was deemed possible that not all respondents would see or agree with the egalitarian portrayal of the structure of schooling as a perpetuator of inequality. After all, consistent with Britain's neoliberal inclinations, schooling is mostly portrayed in positive light in all societies, a blameless social necessity (Harber 2004). And, as Mijs (2019) observes in what he calls the 'paradox of meritocracy', there is a tendency for inequality (UK remarkably unequal) to be accompanied by individualist accounts of social justice.

Consequently, the researcher held that endorsement or not of current educational structures by respondents would surely invite a discussion on *educational reform* and *wider socio-economic implications* (*section 6.3*), given education's central role in enabling access to incoming opportunities (Friedman et al 2016; Pells 2016) – stakeholder endorsement of current educational structures constituting a worsening of inequality with costly health and social consequences as warned by Wilkinson and Pickett; and support for the proposal signifying a break from the 'normal' neoliberal conception of education (Reay 2012, 2017).

Chapter Three – LITERATURE REVIEW

A significant amount of literature has explored the 'unholy' alliance between socio-economic capital and educational success in the English school system, leading to studies like that done by the OECD (2013) reporting that schools in England are amongst the most socially segregated in the developed world. The report cited worrying statistics showing that 80 per cent of working-class minority ethnic children are taught in schools with a high concentration of other immigrant or disadvantaged students. More recently, the government's own Social Mobility Commission (2019) has reported that inequality is so deeply entrenched in England to the extent that gaps between advantaged and disadvantaged children open up before birth and persist throughout life. And, that these gaps are evident throughout the English school system:

> By the age of six (Year 1) there is a 14-percentage point gap in phonics attainment between children entitled to free school meals and their more advantaged peers…….By age eleven (end of Key Stage 2), less than half (46 per cent) of pupils entitled to free school meals reach the standards expected for reading, writing and mathematics, compared to 68 per cent of all other pupils……Only 16 per cent of those on free school meals attain at least two A levels compared to 39 per cent of all other pupils (p.2)

Current academic consensus has it that schools account for between 5 and 50 per cent of the class difference in attainment, the other half lying beyond the school gates in the wealth and income inequalities in wider society (Reay 2017; Benn 2018; Wilkinson and Pickett 2019). Those advocating a class-less school system in England are not blind to such data and even question the extent to which a socially just education system is possible in an unequal society given the degree to which education systems reflect societies they grow out of – or rather, whether 'education can compensate for society' (Reay 2017). Most (Goodson 2010; Reay 2012; Benn 2018) believe that Finland exemplifies their view that education systems reflect the societies they are part of. Compared to the UK, Finland's egalitarian education system with

its emphasis on commonalities among students is attributable to its deeply entrenched systems of social democracy, a social context that the UK lacks. Yet, egalitarian educationists root for the levelling of England's steeply hierarchical school structures as equally key to ending its heavily class-polarised education system.

3.1 STRUCTURAL PURVEYORS OF EDUCATIONAL INEQUALITY

R.H. Tawney (1964) put forward the case for 'common school' asserting that 'the English education system will never be one worthy of a civilized society until the children of all classes in the nation attend the same schools' (p.144). In Tawney's terms, a socially just educational system is one in which a nation secures educationally for all children 'what a wise parent would desire for his own children' (p. 146). Many egalitarian actors argue that we are still miles away from realising Tawney's common school because England's contemporary educational landscape is characterised by a steeply unequal hierarchy of educational provision surrounded by growing economic inequalities that translate into hugely inequitable educational opportunities and outcomes (Dorling 2010; Reay 2012).

Most of the literature in this area of social justice is united in diagnosing a much flatter structure of schooling as the most effective way to achieving Tawney's 'common school'. Proponents of this view argue that abandoning England's steeply hierarchical school structures would not only mute the power of home advantage in securing educational advantage for the middle and upper classes (Reay 2017), but also that it would stop education aiding a divisive and an unstable social environment (Wilkinson and Pickett 2009, 2019). This forms the political and moral argument in support of an integrated school system which Benn (2018) believes the Finnish education system exemplifies:

> Finland teaches us not only that state education will never be considered truly first-rate until we give all our children the same high-quality schooling, but also that a country

> that educates its children together has a better chance of being at ease with itself than one that segregates different parts of the population from an early age (p.4)

The structures egalitarian educationists identify as standing on the way of an integrated education system, and which this research engaged respondents on, include, but not limited to, private schools, state-sector selection, school diversification, setting and streaming, and school choice.

3.1.1 Private-sector apartheid

'Private schools' in this research denotes English fee-charging independent schools. These schools are also widely referred to as public schools, in the sense of being open to pupils irrespective of locality, denomination or parental trade or profession, as opposed to state schools where such attributes are believed to determine access. Of course this distinction is debatable, but that is not the remit of this thesis.

Bourdieu (1993) wrote of grandes ecoles in France (French private schools) as 'enclosures separated from the world, quasi-monastic spaces where they live a life a part, a retreat, withdrawn from the world and entirely taken up with preparing for senior positions' (p.96). In this quote Bourdieu captures the double qualms egalitarian educationists have with the private school system in England. Not only are they perceived as epitomising social exclusivity, separating the privileged 'would be leaders' from the struggles of 'ordinary' life, Bourdieu also bemoans their elitism – private schools' economic exclusivity or rather preoccupation with reproduction and closure of economic privilege that serves as the motivation for their educational excellence, such excellence also being a sure emblem of the educational apartheid they propagate. Evidence shows that private school pupils are six times more likely to get A* grades at GCSE than those at state schools; and that a third of private school pupils score 3A* grades at A-level compared to one in ten at state schools (Benn 2018). Moreover, apart from

the common knowledge that this parallel school system for the better-off accords the 7 per cent who attend it disproportionate access to the super-elite universities of Oxford and Cambridge (Guardian 2017), Friedman et al (2016) argue that independent schools also remain the chief means through which the upper classes operate a form of monopoly privilege, ring-fencing high-status positions across all areas of the economy. Pells (2016) explains how in sport, for example, the proportion of privately educated British sports people taking part in the Rio Olympics was 28 per cent, four times the percentage of the population attending private schools.

It is because of their double characteristics of social exclusivity and economic elitism that Diane Reay (2017) has characterised the existence of private schools as a history of elitism driven by the upper classes' belief that their education should be predicated on their wealth and desires for exclusivity. For Reay (2012), private schools are the 'archetypal model of class-segregated education….a principal means by which elitism and social divisions are produced and perpetuated in England' (p.591). Reay argues that their seamless reproduction of educational inequality is facilitated by family wealth and the much better resource levels in the private as compared to the state-sector. For example, while pupil-teacher ratio in the UK state-sector is 15 to 1, in the private sector it is less than 10 to 1 (OECD 2011). Benn (2018) explains that part of the source of such superior resources is the numerous canny tax schemes enjoyed by both private school parents and the schools themselves which amount to large state subsidies to the most privileged in society. In addition, she argues, their confidence and resource capabilities is augmented by the fees they charge. For example, private day schools now cost, on average, £14,500 a year. Compare this with the average per-pupil spend in a state secondary school of between £4,000 and £6,000 and one easily understands another source of the resource divide which aids private schools' educational excellence.

The fact that private schools today primarily serve the interest of the rich is particularly a scandalous turn of events given that these were originally philanthropic institutions founded to educate the poor. Barekat (2018) explains how in spite of the statutes of private schools like Winchester, Eton, St Paul's and Westminster expressly excluding the children of the wealthy at their onset, moneyed interests forced their way in, and fee-paying pupils outnumbered free scholars by the 15th century; and by 2017, only 1 per cent of pupils attending independent schools paid no fees at all. Consequently, for some egalitarian educationists, the other bone of contention with private schools is that the 'apartheid education system' they operate fundamentally undermines commitment to comprehensive schooling and the quest for a quality social environment (Reay 2017; Verkaik 2019). This is not only because they disproportionately eat into the education expenditure with at least 18 per cent of English school spending going to the only 7 per cent of pupils who are privately educated, but also because their 'charitable status' confers tax advantages worth an estimated £2.5bn per year despite them largely flouting the legal requirement to do a modicum of work for the public benefit (Verkaik 2019). For other egalitarians, the issue lies in the fact that private schools vacuum out the greater spread of families using state education, which in turn takes away the greater pressure on politicians to commit sufficient funds. As Kynaston and Green (2019) put it rather amusingly: 'One only has to witness pushy private school parents on the touchline to realise that the state-sector will never achieve its full capacity without them' (p.45).

For R.H. Tawney (1942), it was more the snobbery that accompanies the social divisiveness of private schools, and their frustration of the noble end of the common school/culture, that warrants their removal. He argued:

> The effect of the division of schools into free and fee-paying is to create a mistaken impression that the latter are in some sense superior, and thus to encourage a social snobbery which it should be one of the functions of education to discredit (p.4)

According to Tawney (1964) the value of social institutions lies in their contribution to the good society. He defined 'the good society' as one that resolutely pursued the elimination of all forms of special privilege, including those of education. Abhorring and labelling the practice of 'getting the best for your own child' at the expense of other people's children 'antisocial egoism', Tawney (1943) advocated for an education system unimpeded by the vulgar irrelevancies of class and income. The price of a socially unjust educational system, underpinned by a tradition of inequality, he argued, was servility and resentment on the one side, and arrogance and patronage on the other.

3.1.2 State-sector segregation

At the introduction of comprehensive schooling in the mid-1960s and the concurrent 'abolition' of selective schooling, it was thought that the only school structures left that would perpetuate classism were private schools. After all, the epitome of class segregation in the state-sector, grammar schools, had been 'abandoned'. Statistics had shown that grammar schools were so classist that of the 26 per cent working-class children who had survived the 11-plus cull, only 0.3 per cent achieved two A-levels or more (Young 2016). It is indeed the case that pockets of grammar schools thrive and that they continue to contribute their fair share of class segregation in the English school system. Yet, their contribution to a classist English state-sector education can be said to only represent the tip of the iceberg.

3.1.2.1 11-plus selection

Grammar schools are state-funded secondary schools that select entrants by academic ability. To gain entry to these schools, pupils are required to pass an exam known as the 11-plus. The 11-plus was traditionally designed to identify the top 25 per cent by ability (Mansfield 2019). However, in practice, the intake of grammar schools varies greatly by school and area, as different schools and counties have different admissions policies. According to the House of

Commons Library (2017), there are 163 grammar schools in England, educating approximately 176,000 pupils (*fig. 3.1 &3.2*), compared to 3.2 million in the state-funded secondary system as a whole. Grammar schools are not evenly located around the country and are located only in 36 out of the 151 (24 per cent) Local Authority Areas.

Fig. 3.1: **Location of Grammar schools in England**

Source: House of Commons Library (2017)

Grammar schools have existed since the sixteenth century, but the modern grammar school concept dates back to the 1944 Education Act. This is the Act that re-organised secondary education into a tripartite system – so called because children were to be selected and allocated to one of three different types of secondary school, through an exam at age 11 to select the 'brightest' children supposedly according to their natural ability and aptitudes (Reay 2017). Those who passed the 11-plus got into a grammar school. These offered an academic curriculum and access to higher education and non-manual jobs. The rest, the 11-plus failures, went into secondary modern schools. They were offered a non-academic, 'practical' curriculum and access to manual work. There was a third strand – technical school. They existed in a few areas because only very few such schools were ever built.

The reorganisation of the school system into a tripartite system was a consequence of a growing idea at the time that the education system should be meritocratic – that individuals should achieve their status in life through their own efforts and abilities, rather than it being ascribed at birth by their class background (Mijs 2016). Anchored on a renewed promise of tackling working-class underachievement, the rhetoric was that grammar schools were to take the 25 per cent most academically able children, regardless of class background, thereby substantially increasing educational opportunities for the disadvantaged. However, the reality was that the system legitimised class inequality through the ideology that ability is an inborn characteristic which can be measured early on in life through the 11-plus exam, ignoring the growing evidence that children's environment greatly affects their chances of educational success (Millar 2017; Reay 2017). So, instead of 'promoting meritocracy', the tripartite system effectively reproduced class inequality by channelling the two social classes into two different types of school that offered unequal opportunities: those destined for university and better jobs, and those deemed more suitable for less-celebrated professions (BBC 2016; Horrie 2017). As Halsey, Heath and Ridge (1980) found in their research which spanned the 1930s and the 1970s and assessed the progress made by grammar schools up to 1972, school inequalities of opportunity had remained remarkably stable over the forty years which their study covered. Throughout that period, the middle and upper classes had roughly three times the chance of the working-class of getting into some kind of selective secondary schooling. And, even those working-class children who did get into grammar schools were frequently relegated to the bottom sets on the basis of their 'ability' (Ford 1969). As for classism in attainment, the Robbins Report (1963) found that 33 per cent of those whose fathers were higher professionals went on to get degrees, while only 2 per cent of those from skilled working-class backgrounds, and just 1 per cent of those from semi- or unskilled backgrounds did so.

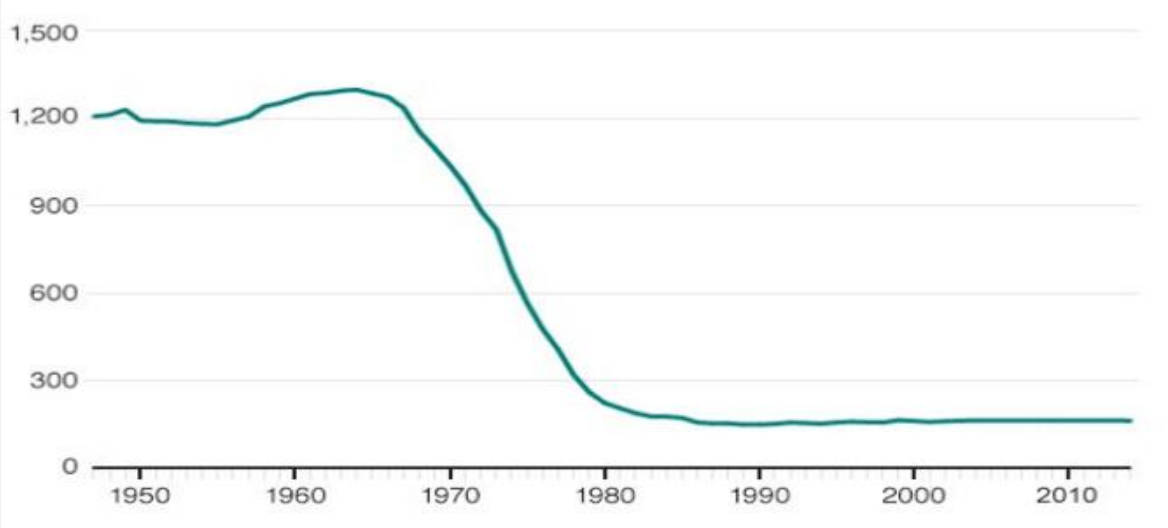
A number of egalitarian commentators (Reay 2017; Young 1971; Douglas et al 1971; Horrie 2017) argue that the greatest damage inflicted by grammar schools was not on those few working classes who gained entry but on the far larger group of working-class children who failed the 11-plus and ended up in secondary modern schools. Former secondary modern pupils like Chris Horrie (2017) have called a travesty the 'creaming off' of pupils to grammar schools while writing off as 'failures' a majority of very young children. According to one such student[8], labelling thousands of children in this way and putting them in a school was a crushing indictment that made any chance of educational success a battle. The effect of failure, he/she adds, were deep-rooted and continued to impact on them more than 30 years later. Apart from the obvious psychological cost of the rejection of 'many' at every selection of 'one', Reay (2017) argues that secondary moderns were also damaging in the sense that they were secondary in more than one way. They were seen as a second-rate provision for less-intelligent children and, as such, were subject to poor funding and a narrow curriculum. In 1950s it was estimated that the average grammar school pupil received 170 per cent more per annum, in terms of resources, than the average secondary modern school child.

During the 1950s and 1960s, the evidence that selective education system reinforced class division and perpetuated middle-class privilege led Labour politicians and egalitarian educationalists to reject the tripartite system. Ironically, the most potent political impetus for change came from a concern to address not the appalling amount of working-class underachievement caused by the tripartite system but, rather, the growing anger and outrage of disenfranchised middle-class parents whose children had failed to get into grammar schools (Hunter 1984). Assuming power with a manifesto that included the creation of all-ability comprehensive system of education, the newly elected Labour government of 1964 ordered

[8] An anonymous 11-plus failure who wrote in the *Guardian* in 2015.

local education authorities to start phasing out grammar schools and secondary moderns in order to replace them with a comprehensive system (*fig. 3.2*). The quickest changes were made in Labour-controlled areas, while strongly Conservative counties moved slowly or not at all. In 1998, Labour's School Standards and Framework Act forbade the establishment of any new all-selective schools.

Fig. 3.2: **Decline of grammar schools in England and Wales**



Source: House of Commons Library (2017)

The 11-plus selection debate was recently resurrected by the former Prime Minister Theresa May's Government's intention to allow selective schools to expand, for new ones to be set up, and for non-selective schools to become selective. May (2016) argued that more grammar schools would address working-class underachievement and raise social mobility. They were to be her main means of achieving her vision of a truly meritocratic Britain that put the interests of ordinary, working-class people first according to a speech she delivered on 9 September 2016.

The debate triggered by May's plans for education shaped up to epitomise what some egalitarian actors consider the audacity of the old educational myth of meritocracy, evident in the government's adamant selling of new grammar schools as a route to greater social mobility

against the hard evidence that the net impact of selection is wholly negative for the poorest children (Millar 2017; Reay 2017). Research analysing May's proposals found that for a child to have a 50-50 chance of getting into one of May's new grammar schools, they would need to be in one of the wealthiest 10 per cent of families in the country (Burgess et al. 2017). Lamenting May's attachment to 11-plus selection despite evidence of its class-segregation, Millar (2017) attacks its age-old biological assumptions:

> At the heart of this debate is the 11-plus test. Still masquerading as an assessment of Cyril Burt's discredited 'innate' ability, the only innate thing about it is its deep unfairness. Even the most sympathetic psychologists today admit that human potential and development are a complex mix of heritability and environment, which can't be evaluated in a single exam.

For Millar, the myth that grammar schools – currently admitting about 3 per cent of children eligible for FSM, compared with a national average of 18 per cent – can be the route to social mobility, must arise to the fact that disadvantage bites early: attainment gaps are wide by 11 and insurmountable for families who cannot afford to join the private tuition arms race.

3.1.2.2 'Comprehensive selection'

The title 'comprehensive selection' may sound like a contradiction in terms, but according to egalitarian educationists, it captures the various ways in which the clamour for social mixing or rather Tawney's 'common school' has been thwarted by the very structure that was originally created to bring it about. The original intention and hope for a uniform education system was vividly articulated by Crosland (1956) as the push for comprehensivisation and equality gathered pace in the 1950s and 1960s:

> The system will increasingly be built around the comprehensive school….All schools will more and more be socially mixed; all will provide routes to the universities and to every type of occupation from the highest to the lowest….Then very slowly, Britain will cease to be the most class-ridden country in the world (p.207).

However, over half a century since the ‘abolishment’ of grammar schools and the introduction of the comprehensive school system, egalitarian advocacy argues that private schools and the remaining grammar schools are just ‘the tip of the iceberg of educational privilege which in England today covers a wide range of schools’ (Reay 2017, p.46). According to Jones (2003), despite comprehensive schooling being introduced to address the tripartite system’s failure to harness working-class educational potential, it has lived in the shadow of selective education and in many cases perpetuated selective arrangements. ‘Comprehensive selection’ is today facilitated, not only by residential segregation where it manifests itself in classed school admission mechanisms, but also in the inside of school classist teaching and learning arrangements which perpetuate differential attainment and educational experience. Regarding the former, a recent Sutton Trust report (Cullinane et al 2017) reveals that the top performing 500 comprehensive schools in England, based on GCSE attainment, are highly socially selective, taking just 9.4 per cent of pupils eligible for FSM, scarcely more than half the national average at 17.2 per cent. These schools make up nearly one in six state-funded secondary schools but the class-gap they contribute is similar to that in wholly selective areas at 8.9 per cent. About half of this gap, the Sutton Trust report explains, is due to the location of high attaining schools in catchment areas with lower numbers of disadvantaged pupils, and the rest being due to social selection in admissions occurring even within those neighbourhoods. The report adds that residential segregation is explained by the evidence that living in the catchment area of a top comprehensive school is associated with a house price ‘premium’ of around 20 per cent. This translates to a typical house in the catchment area of a top 500 school costing £45,700 more than the average house in the same local authority. Such reflects Simon’s (1999) charge that residential patterns around schools reflect deeper, historical socio-economic inequalities.

As for inside of school classist segregation, egalitarian educationists like Reay (2012), Gillborn and Youdell (2000) and Jones (2003) argue that the once damaging social divisions occasioned by the 11-plus selection is today securely replicated within the post-1965 pseudo-comprehensive system in the structure of setting and streaming. Hardly 20 years into their existence, Robert Burges (1983) vividly bemoaned the nature and extent of social selection in the comprehensive schools he researched. Through setting and streaming, he argued, the comprehensive system, like its predecessor, had managed to build up a separate set of expectations for the different 'ability' groups leading to the development of an alternative form of schooling, but this time, within the school. While the tripartite system had segregated social classes in different school buildings, the comprehensive system, despite the equity hullabaloo and the acclaimed benefits of social mixing that occasioned its emergence, was now segregating them within the same school building. For egalitarian educationists like Megir and Palme (2005), selection through streaming exists despite evidence from the Nordic countries showing that the abolition of setting and streaming is not only more educationally just in terms of treating students as academic equals, but also significantly increases social mobility. And, apart from the evidence that low sets are places of educational failure where children are written off as having no hope of succeeding, research shows that they are also places of psychological despair. Regarding the former, Parsons and Hallam's (2014) research shows that setting and streaming widens the class attainment gap as working-class children who are disproportionately placed in lower sets and streams are further disadvantaged. As for the psychological cost, Reay's (2017) research in English schools, which stretched over 25 years, reports that the vast majority of working-class students in bottom sets expressed a sense of powerlessness and worthlessness. They regularly described themselves as 'stupid, useless and rubbish' (p.78), and often felt that they 'count for nothing' in the school context (p.77). Reay argues that these sentiments reveal the destructive nature of the English educational system for

those who struggle. They are in large measure a reminder that English 'educational processes are, simultaneously, classed processes in which relations of teaching and learning too often position working-class pupils as inadequate learners with inadequate cultural backgrounds, looked down on for their stupidity' (p.81)

3.1.3 State-sector diversification/marketisation efforts

The current policy framework for school quasi-markets in England has origins in the 1988 Education Reform Act (ERA). The ERA introduced open enrolment and per capita funding to place schools more directly into competition with one another. Schools received greater control over finance and an option out of local authority governance. The overall logic of the ERA was that choice and competition would develop incentives for institutional diversity and improvement, and that inequalities would reduce as disadvantaged families gained more choice and unpopular schools faced the threat of closure (Allen and Higham 2018). Since 1988, successive attempts have been made to achieve these aims. While demand-side reforms have seen more school performance data for parents, supply-side reforms have sought to promote institutional diversity by allowing existing schools to convert to new statuses (e.g. convertor academies), for non-state actors to take over existing schools where they are judged to be 'inadequate' or 'coasting' (e.g. as sponsored academies), and for free schools to emerge (Ozga 2009). Such market-based reforms are strongly faulted by egalitarian actors like Reay (2017) who see in them the dissolution of a comprehensive system that was never fully comprehensive, and its replacement by new elements that combine selection, elitism and patronage under the guise of providing diversity and choice.

Though sold as a social justice initiative, evidence shows that marketisation efforts, like the tripartite and 'comprehensive' school systems they are 'replacing', have mainly ended up perpetuating middle-class domination of educational success. Egalitarian concerns are

confirmed by the OECD (2007) PISA analysis and other academic analysis of the PISA figures that have identified that 'more market-oriented school regimes tend to increase schools' social segregation, whilst those characterised as more comprehensive and publicly regulated tend to reduce it' (Angel Alegre and Ferrer 2010, p.433). Thus, Sutton Trust (2010) has suggested that mitigating these consequences of marketisation requires a fair access and admissions policy for disadvantaged pupils, and that in areas of deprivation, schools should be encouraged to take poorer pupils through the incentive of a £3,000 'pupil premium'. In addition, schools should have a measure in league tables that shows the extent to which they are narrowing the attainment gap between disadvantaged pupils and their affluent peers.

3.1.3.1 School choice

Situated on the demand-side of ERA reforms, school choice is the mechanism that the English school system employs when it comes to dealing with the fundamental issue of which students should attend which schools. Families are invited to nominate a ranked list of preferred schools for their child. If there is space at these schools, then parental choice is decisive. If a school is over-subscribed, then other criteria come into play[9], but parental choice remains an important input into the assignment (DfE 2014). The policy was a key component of ERA's accountability mechanism that was central to the standards agenda. It was thought that parents would base their choices largely on school academic performance, thereby keeping schools on their toes and ensuring high standards throughout the system.

Although choice is highly treasured with 72 per cent of parents in England believing they ought to have a basic right to choose (Exley 2011), studies of the impact of ERA show that advantaged families are more likely to gain places at desirable schools than disadvantaged ones (Levacic and Hardman 1998; Reay1998). The evidence that school choice outcomes reflect the socio-

[9] When a school receives more applications than there are places available (published admissions number or PAN), the oversubscription criteria is used. A school's oversubscription criteria dictates the order in which it allocates places.

economic divide and perpetuate classism makes the policy defeat its own educational equity objective. Bourdieu (1986) gives an insight into why school choice is another mechanism of the education *field* which perpetuates socio-economic privilege. According to him, individuals bring to bear on their choices in life a series of assets or capitals. Middle-class advantage in school choice processes comes via economic capital (advantage in terms of financial assets and income invested in educational resources); social capital (the social networks relied upon to inform school choice decisions) and cultural capital (the attitudes and knowledge, defined by those in power, which makes the education system a comfortable and familiar place in which they can succeed easily). Economic capital, for instance, comes handy in the financial resources enabling the possibility of moving house to access the catchment area of a high-performing school, or buying additional tutoring to support entrance exams (Cassen and Kingdon 2007). Sharon Gewirtz (1995) explains the power of socio-economic capital in influencing skilful exercise of school choice in her study of 14 London secondary schools. She distinguished between privileged-skilled choosers (professional middle-class parents who used their economic and cultural capital to gain access to the best schools for their children); and disconnected-local choosers (working-class parents whose choices were restricted by their lack of economic and cultural capital). Unlike the former who are able to take full advantage of the choices open to them because they were prosperous, confident and well educated, the latter were less confident in their dealings with schools, less aware of choices available to them and less able to manipulate the system to their advantage. Similar observations are made by Coldron et al (2008) who identify a social gradient in the use of formal sources of information on schools. Mothers who have qualifications at level 4 or higher (degree level) are three times as likely to use formal sources as those who have no qualifications. As Ball (2003) puts it, school choice mechanism in England requires time, effort, expense and skill which some families have

but some lack. It requires 'resources and capital that are unevenly distributed across the population but with which the middle class are particularly well endowed' (p. 173).

Egalitarians also fault school choice for failing the equity and/or standards objective due to the evidence that the interaction between class and the conception of educational quality frustrates the standards goal. While middle-class parents are known to have a narrow conception of quality as being analogous with expected test scores, working-class patterns of educational choice appear to be as much about the avoidance of anxiety, failure and rejection as they are about 'choosing a good school for my child' (Reay and Ball 1997, p. 93). In other words, working-class parents tend to value accessibility and friendliness of teachers, and to rely on 'gut feeling'/intuition or favour a sense of 'being at home' as opposed to focusing on school performance (Burgess et al 2015). The fact that some parents do not choose schools by placing a large weight on school performance means that poorly performing schools may be insufficiently pressurised into improvement if their admissions stay 'undeservedly' high. This blunts school choice as an accountability or standards/equity mechanism.

Egalitarian educationists are particularly incensed that England's neoliberal policy environment continues to valorise school choice despite the evidence that choices come with resources that remain very unequally distributed (Ball 2003; Reay 2012). Reay (2012) argues that school choice has become the main policy that the middle and upper classes have very successfully mobilised in their strategy of keeping ahead, a contemporary example of Tawney's anti-social egoism. For her, despite choice becoming a buzzword in education, the working classes predominantly constitute those who are not able to exercise 'choice'.

3.1.3.2 School diversification

As stated earlier, the supply side of ERA is today mainly embodied in free schools and academies, diversification of the education market policies introduced to support school choice

and educational equity. However, despite their equity objective, they are today faulted for perpetuating a divisive education system rather than a diversified one (Reay 2017). The policy operates against a consistent finding that specific forms of institutional diversity are associated with social selection/segregation. Allen (2007) reports that in most parts of England, secondary schools are more segregated than their neighbourhoods, but that this is most pronounced where more students attend grammar, voluntary aided or foundation schools. Coldron (2015) too observes that schools that act as admission authorities are more likely to use complex admission criteria, uneven banding and/or be reluctant to accept hard to place children. The fact that these new entrants to a diversified state-sector, like faith schools, enjoy some form of separation from the mainstream state-sector while continuing to draw large parts of their income from the public purse, may not augur well for social inclusion. Evidence shows that separation enables them to impose all manner of restrictions on entry, selecting pupils with characteristics that they regard as desirable, and making them over-represented in the top 500 comprehensive schools (Cullinane et al 2017).

3.1.3.2.1 Academies

The Academy schools programme was launched in England in 2000 by the New Labour government of 1997-2010 and adopted and expanded by the Coalition Government of 2010-2015. Built upon City Technology Colleges (CTCs) which had been introduced in the late 1980s, and influenced by the charter school movement in the USA and Sweden, they were defined as publicly funded independent schools, led by sponsors from business, faith, education or charitable organisations (Winstanley 2012). They would be legally independent of local authorities and would sign a funding agreement directly with the central government. They were to be operated by trusts, which have the legal basis of companies limited by guarantee with a charitable status (Allen and Higham 2018). Their independent status meant that they

would enjoy ‘freedoms’ not available to other schools in the state-sector (Purcell 2011). The 2010 Academies Act referred to them as ‘freedoms to innovate’ and listed them as: ‘freedom from local authority control; the ability to set their own pay and conditions for staff; freedoms around the delivery of the curriculum, and the ability to change the lengths of terms and school days’ (DfE 2013). Egalitarian commentators like Heilbronn (2016) have argued that such freedoms securely put academy schools ‘in the market-place’, and exposed Labour’s quasi-market tendencies, that were previously dressed up as social justice initiatives. Others have suggested that it indicated an embrace of a neoliberal conception of the English education system, which the Coalition Government (2010-2015) would later securely position within a broader discourse about school choice and diversity (Purcell 2011). Compared with only 203 academy schools in May 2010 when the Coalition government took power, statistics in June 2017 showed that there were 4,890 academies in England (Allen and Higham 2018). The speed and extent of what is in essence a form of privatisation has been remarkable. The implication of the academisation policy being that education is a ‘product’ or a ‘service’ delivered in the market-place.

Despite the explicit market inclinations, the academy programme was largely promoted as a social justice reform policy that would raise aspirations, broaden opportunities and improve standards in disadvantaged communities (Purcell 2011). Such was deemed the remedy for the problem of working-class educational underachievement which had been located with ‘failing schools’, often situated in deprived areas (Kerr and West 2010). The goal was to drive standards through the conversion of poorly performing schools into new academies, thereby providing them with greater independence, resources, and the opportunity to ‘re-brand’. In the words of the government of their inception, academies were: an initiative ‘to replace seriously failing schools’ in order ‘to raise standards by breaking the cycle of underperformance and low expectations’ (Blunkett 2000); a ‘radical approach’ to tackle poor performance – a sign of the

government's commitment to ensuring that 'all children and young people, whatever their background and wherever they live……achieve high standards' (DfEE 2000, p. 4). Such rhetoric, with its mixed emphasis on independence from state-sector and tackling of disadvantage, exemplified Labour's Third Way ideology, combining a rhetoric of quasi-markets with a discourse of social justice (Mulderrig 2003).

But evidence shows that the interaction of choice and competition with an emphasis on accountability (which often dovetail quasi-market reforms) is one of a range of influences on social segregation (Woods et al. 1998). Today, the academies programme is deemed to have failed what was sold as a social justice aim realisable through the markets. A report by the National Audit Office (2010) showed that on average, the gap between disadvantaged pupils and their more affluent peers has actually grown wider in academies than in comparable maintained schools. Moreover, academy schools were found to be flouting admission rules by finding methods to covertly select pupils from more privileged families according to a major report by Academies Commission (2013). More recent data shows that academies admit the lowest rate of disadvantaged pupils of the main school types, and comprise 63 per cent of the top schools, compared to just 40 per cent of all secondaries (Reay 2017). For others like Heilbronn (2016) the threat to educational equity posed by academy schools comes from freedom they enjoy from local authority control which gives them the power to decide their own admissions and exclusions policies. Regarding the ease of exclusion, for example, evidence shows that academy schools are three times more likely than community schools to exclude students (DfE 2014). Heilbronn makes a link with the democratic deficit in the governance of academy schools to explain the danger of such freedoms to educational equity:

> Students, who need particular support in accessing the curriculum cost more than others. They may take more time, attention and specialised teacher skill. If schools focus largely on test and examination results and have freedom over admission and

> exclusion policies, there is a risk that students are treated as a means to better test results rather than as young people with an entitlement to education (2016, p.9).

For Heilbronn (2016), the policy's failure to achieve its equity objective was bound to be the outcome. This is because given the lack of common experiences and a common culture that are necessary to inspire equity, 'the model of education in a privatised system is one which whatever the rhetoric around inclusion and social cohesion cannot deliver equity' (p.11). Such too was the observation made by Gorard et al. (2013) who declared that state-funded school diversity 'is almost inevitably a cause of further segregation'(p.193).

3.1.3.2.2 Free schools

Like academies, free schools are part of an ongoing policy agenda to liberalise the supply-side of the school quasi-market in England, by allowing non-state actors – 'teachers, charities, parent groups, faith organisations and others' – to open and govern new state schools in response to parental demand (DfE 2010, p. 58). Modelled on the Swedish education system, they were introduced in 2010 by the 2010-2015 Coalition Government, and enjoy the same legal status as academies, beneficiaries of the 2010 Academies Act's modification of the ERA wording which allows the Secretary of State for Education to enter into academy arrangements with any person (Wolfe 2011). About 325 free schools had been established in the first five annual waves between 2011/12 and 2015/16, and the Conservative governments elected in 2015 and 2017 pledged to increase their number to 900 by 2020 (DfE 2015). There is no single official definition of the word 'free' in 'free school'. In English policy texts, 'free' is associated with the fact that free schools aren't run by the local council. Apart from being held accountable by the central government against the same inspection framework and performance indicators as other schools in the state-sector, they have more control over how they do things (DfE 2017).

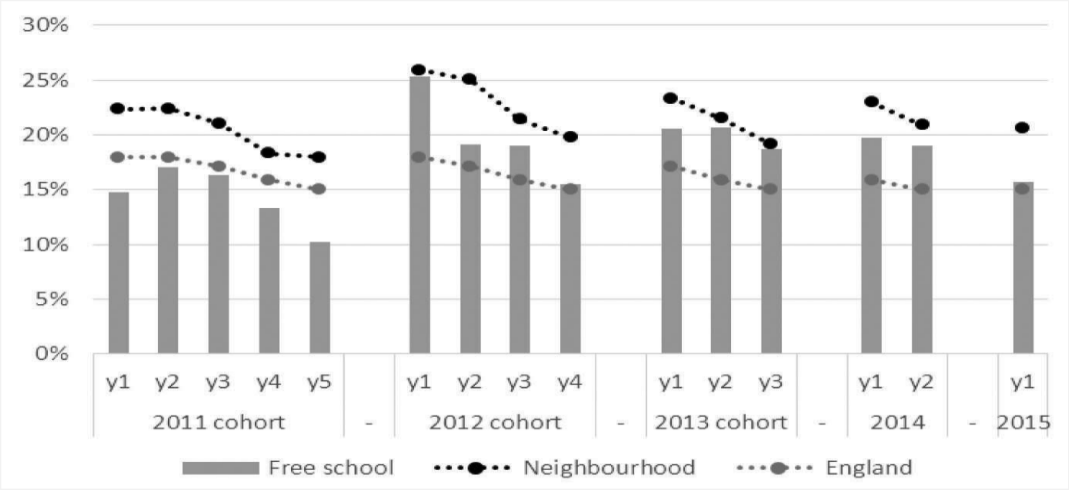
At the time of their introduction, the Department for Education defined free schools as 'all-ability state-funded schools set up in response to what local people say they want and need in order to improve education for children in their community' (DfE 2010). As was the case with academies, the government presented the policy as an education market liberalisation effort with a social justice aim. The argument was that free schools would bolster school choice, create new competitive pressure on existing schools and contribute to greater equity, not least because the people and organizations opening free schools would be 'motivated by the desire to make a difference in disadvantaged areas' (DfE 2010, p.59). The Secretary of State for Education at their inception, Michael Gove, articulated this social justice goal by emphasising that free schools would address the needs of the poorest children by raising the standard of education in the most disadvantaged areas (BBC 2010). His successor, Nicky Morgan, was to re-emphasise, five years on, that social justice remained the policy goal. She explained: Free schools are the 'modern engines of social justice' helping to 'break the cycle of disadvantage' (DfE 2015, p.1).

Despite their social justice policy posturing, there have been concerns, right from their inception, that free schools could exacerbate social selection and reproduce social inequality (NUT 2013; Stokes 2014). One of the concerns relates to the fact that free schools being able to determine their own admission policies raises concerns for selection. In an era of a weakened admissions code by the 2010 Academies Act, the policy of schools being their own admission authority emboldens selection because it allows schools to create prioritized catchment areas (instead of using a simple distance measure) as an oversubscription criterion and to select 10 per cent of their students by aptitude, determined by a test, in specific subject specialisms (Allen and Higham 2018). This concern is consistent with the evidence coming from Sweden indicating that free schools increased socio-economic and racial segregation, including by being overrepresented in urban, affluent and gentrifying localities (Wiborg 2010). Perhaps

most significantly, there is the fear that people and organisations opening free schools can choose to locate their schools in more advantaged areas or develop a school ethos and curriculum that proves more attractive to particular parents, including by class and/or ethnicity (Higham 2014). This worry was confirmed by Lubienski et al.'s (2009) research which found that in Detroit, Washington DC and New Orleans, even when the stated mission was to serve poorer students, both for-profit and not-for-profit charter schools (free schools' sister schools) tended to adopt locations on the outer edges of poorer areas to try to attract more 'aspirational' parents. Allen and Higham (2018) argue that the social selectiveness of free schools may be exacerbated in England because of the lack of decisive rules on location. Free schools can open in response to 'parental demand' rather than demographic need for places alone, and so can in principle create or contribute to an over-supply of places in desirable locations.

Indeed, it looks like some of the concerns regarding social selection in free schools were not misplaced. Early analyses of free school intakes, especially, with regard to their representativeness of the neighbourhoods from which they recruit, in terms of socio-economic status, found that apart from free schools having in fact been located mainly in areas of 'somewhat above average disadvantage', they admitted fewer pupils eligible for FSM than did neighbouring schools (Green et al. 2015). Allen and Higham (2018) report that the general picture for both primary and secondary free schools is that they do not admit a representative proportion of students eligible for FSM (*fig. 3.3*). While nationally 16.7 per cent of children are entitled to claim FSM, in free schools the percentage of claimants is 10 per cent (Cullinane et al. 2017). This prompted the National Audit office (2017) to conclude that free schools have a negative effect on surrounding schools, creaming off more privileged students, and providing poor value for money.

Fig.3.3 **Pupils eligible for FSM at secondary free schools in Year 7 compared to their neighbourhoods**



Source: Allen and Higham (2018)

In summary, such evidence of choice and diversity being linked to inequalities in the state-sector has led proponents of egalitarian education system in England to argue that the neoliberal rhetoric around school choice and diversity, though sounding progressive, positive and beneficial, has worked discursively to bury social class as a crucial axis of educational inequality whilst sanctioning and exacerbating inequalities (Reay 2012; Ball 2003). As such, egalitarian actors like Reay (2012) argue that 'the abolition of private schools would not promote greater social justice if the hierarchy and elitism they exacerbate is replicated in the state-sector. So, alongside private schools, faith, foundation, trust schools, academies, and free schools would need to be replaced by a truly comprehensive system where the differences between schools is minimised, while diversity within them is maximised' (p.591). Under such a system, the existing inequitable diversity of types of school will be replaced with a concern for intra-school and classroom diversity so that possibilities for social mixing are enhanced; a move towards Tawney's 'common school'. Tawney had observed that common schools were crucial to common culture, and as Haydon (2007) has recently argued, the common values they generate are necessary for democratic societies because:

> without significant common values, principles and procedures, such societies would lack not only stability and coherence, but also the justice for their members to live together as free and equal democratic citizens (p. 223).

Similarly, Heilbronn (2016) observes: ‘when treated as a public service rather than a private space, education acts as a unifying factor in the maintenance of social cohesion. It promotes, maintains and develops a common set of cultural and social expectations, through its core value of the commonality of entitlement and experience’ (p.10)

Chapter Four – METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

4.1 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research set out to investigate the qualitatively different ways in which educational stakeholders make sense of the interface between social class and the organisation of schooling in England. Such perspectives giving insight into the wider appeal of the mainly academic-driven egalitarian advocacy for a structurally integrated school system in what is technically a liberal democracy. I anchored this research within the interpretivist paradigm, adopting subjectivist ontological/epistemological assumptions, i.e. the stance that the world exists and different people experience and construct it in different ways. As such, the enquiry was rooted in an epistemological emphasis on description, knowledge of such world deemed a matter of meaning, and of the qualitative similarities and differences in meaning as is experienced by different people as opposed to an approach that neatly summarises subjective experiences into universally conceived categories (Svensson 1997). Consequently, the data collection process involved individual description of understanding accessed through qualitative interviews conducted on a small but representative sample of non-policy making educational stakeholders (*teachers, parents* and *pupils*). My decision to settle for a methodology/method that seeks the unequivocal expression of the voice of the non-policy-making stakeholder (or rather of 'public') was inspired by the conviction that a socially just approach to the pursuit of democratic cultures/institutions is one that allows the experiences/problems of all the segments of the society that compose the public to whom and for whom democracy operates of all concerned to find free expression and incorporation into social reform (Dewey 1916; Reay 2017). I was concerned that such important voice is either mostly missing or often quantitatively summarised in the debate regarding this kind of educational reform in England (Reay 2017; Benn 2018; Perry and Francis 2010). The power of qualitative research to capture

the insights of those without power in this debate was underlined by Diane Reay (2017), who used qualitative interviews to explore working-class people's experiences of education, and to movingly expose English education system's inherent structural inequality and its damaging human consequences. Similarly, Perry and Francis, argue that educational reform approaches adopted by policy makers to close the class-gap (such as those employed to reinvigorate and resource education in areas of poverty, to 'raise aspirations' of working-class young people, and to expand and diversify the education market) are often limited or flawed because they lack a crucial constituency: insights from the lived experiences of young people and their families. In other words, only holistic and collaborative models anchored on the lived experiences of stakeholders, and not deficit discourses and compensatory models (Dyson et al. 2010) stand a chance of tackling the class gap. It was my desire to deeply explore the 'insights' of this crucial constituency to educational reform that saw me settle for the qualitative methodology, employing qualitative interviews which, because of their length and free style gave voice to parents, pupils and teachers on the perennial debate of a structurally equitable school system in English.

I endeavoured to analyse the perceptions emerging from the data collected into specific 'categories of description': a) **opinion**, determined by the extent to which emerging perceptions were: i) deemed *supportive* of the egalitarian proposal, ii) interpreted as *unsupportive,* or iii) are considered offering a *mixed* position on the issue of an integrated school system in England. Determination of stakeholder opinion in this regard was derived from the thrust of their perceptions as expressed in the interview, such conversation geared toward expounding the egalitarian position in a manner accessible to all stakeholder types, b) **reasons** or the explanations for stakeholder position on the proposal. These too were identified from perceptions emerging from the interview, and understood in terms of distributive justice, simply because the egalitarian proposal addressed the justice of allocating incoming

educational opportunities. This informed the coding of emerging reasons in support of opinion in terms of *individualist* or *structural* accounts of distributive justice. Analysis of emerging perceptions was whole group orientated – all data analysed together with the aim of identifying possible patterns in the stakeholder conceptions of the social class/schooling phenomenon. This is because the object of study was not the phenomenon per se (the interaction between class and the structure of schooling in England) but the phenomenon's relationship with the actors (stakeholder perception of such interface), and the possible implications of their perspectives for educational reform.

4.2 PARTICIPANTS AND CONTEXT

Information needed to answer the research questions was collected from 72 participants, comprised of three stakeholder categories (*teachers, parents* and *pupils*), drawn from two English regions (*Northwest* and *Southeast*) and linked to four secondary school types (*private, grammar, grant-maintained,* and *'open' comprehensive*). Stakeholder variation (via category, region and school-type) was deemed key to the breadth of opinion in this sensitive area of educational debate. The only key stakeholder not engaged was the national policy-makers or politicians. This is because their view is in the public domain and can largely be said to be neoliberal in character. The main policies pursued by the three main UK political parties while in government have largely influenced classist structures, the pursuit of educational quality and justice defined almost purely in neoliberal terms – markets, competition, choice, diversity, and standards (Reay 2017; Benn 2018; Allen and Higham 2018, Purcell 2011).

4.2.1 Regions

The sampling of the English regions from which schools and ultimately stakeholder participants were drawn was done using stratified and random sampling methods. The nine English regions – Southeast, London, East of England, Northeast, Northwest, West Midlands,

East Midlands, Yorkshire and the Humber, and Southwest – were first stratified into two groups based on political party affiliation (mainly Labour or mainly Conservative). The decision to proceed this way was influenced by Bourdieu's (1977) concept of *habitus* i.e. the possibility of a 'cultural' situatedness of opinion on this class-based topic given the tribal nature of UK politics, or rather of the right-wing (Conservative Party) and left-wing (Labour Party) political orientation of these regions. For the purposes of this research, regional political affiliation was operationalised by the 2017-19 seats in the UK's House of Commons (UK Parliament 2020). The two strata from which the two participating regions were derived were: i) **Mainly Conservative** – East Midlands (CON=27, LAB=12); Southeast (CON=64, LAB=8); Southwest (CON=45, LAB=7); West Midlands (CON=35, LAB=23) and East of England (CON=48; LAB=5); ii) **Mainly Labour** – Northeast (LAB=25; CON=3); Northwest (LAB=47, CON=18); Yorkshire and The Humber (LAB=35, CON=17); London (LAB=47, CON=19). The figures denote the number of parliamentary seats England's two main parties garnered in each region in the 2017 General Election.

The randomly sampled regions from the two strata were Northwest and Southeast. The two regions not only strongly typify the tribal nature of English politics as shown above, but also of its deep socio-economic divide. According to the latest Office for National Statistics (2018) figures, the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita for the two regions are: Northwest = £28,449, and the Southeast = £34,083. Such socio-economic divide may not only be the source of England's political stratification but also of a possible 'culturally' diversified opinion on this topic. This informed the conviction that the sample was a good outcome.

4.2.2 Schools

The respondents came from four secondary school types which were selected through simple random sampling and systematic sampling as shown below.

- I identified the school types for each region at the gov.uk site: 'All schools and colleges in England'.
- Ten of each school-type was selected from the generated list for each region. Systematic sampling (one school at intervals of seven, intervals of four for the lesson common types) was used to select the ten schools.
- I verified the contacts of the identified schools, discarding any selected school where there were outright issues e.g. with willingness to take part. Another school (s) was selected at the next seventh/fourth interval to maintain the ten.
- I formally contacted the gate-keepers of each of the ten schools.
- The first school for each school-type to respond in the affirmative was chosen and the rest (nine) discarded.

Systematic sampling's 'inbuild bias' was minimised by the fact that the list to which this sampling method was applied was generated by the gov.uk site for the two regions in no particular order. Such possible bias was further reduced by the fact that of the ten schools selected, only the first one to respond in the affirmative was used, further increasing the equal chance of each school making the final sample.

4.2.3 Stakeholders

Below is an outline of the respondent categories and their characteristics. For the purposes of capturing a balanced and broader opinion, characteristics such as gender, ethnicity, sexuality, etc though not essential were considered desirable and pursued in the process of respondent selection:

- PUPILS – three for each of the four school types in each of the two regions = **24.** (Secondary school, focus – age 14 -16).
- PARENTS – three for each of the four school types in each of the two regions = **24**.

- TEACHERS – three for each of the four school types in each of the two regions = **24**.

The decision to equalise stakeholder-category numbers was borne of the view that the voice of each stakeholder, and by extension, category is equally important, especially, in a functioning democracy, and if social justice was to mean anything. Like John Dewey (1916), I believe that democratic institutions/culture should be extracted from the shared experiences and problems of all the segments of the society that compose the public to whom and for whom democracy operates. A just way to extract such experiences requires giving those affected an equal voice.

The chosen schools aided the selection of respondents. The researcher sampled the prospective student participants for each school type as follows: i) a list of form/house groups for school years 9-11 was sought; ii) one form/house was randomly selected from a box with names of available forms; iii) the list of students in the chosen form/form were stratified by gender and ethnicity (where applicable)[10], minority ethnicity grouped together irrespective of gender. The participating three students were randomly selected from these strata, one per stratum. Where parental consent could not be secured for any selected student (s), the next student (s) was selected from the failed stratum.

Similarly, in the case of parent and teacher participants, the researcher requested a list of twelve stakeholders for each respondent category from the school. The provided list was stratified by gender and ethnic-minority into three strata (ethnicity-minority accorded own category irrespective of gender, but only where viable, otherwise third category consisting of an equal number of boys and girls). Three participants for each category were selected at random, one from each stratum. The researcher felt no obvious interest in schools manipulating these lists, as the research was not in any way an audit of school performance/culture. As such, participants were deemed representative of the research population.

[10] Third stratum consisting of an equal number of boys and girls where ethnic minority stratum was not viable.

Below is biographical data of the participants who took part in this research:

Table 4.1: Biographical information of research participants

Stakeholder name	*Stakeholder type*	*School type*	*English Region*
Ellie	Teacher	Grant-maintained	Southeast
Liza	Pupil	Open-comprehensive	Northwest
Patricia	Parent	Private	Northwest
Penny	Parent	Grant-maintained	Northwest
Tony	Pupil	Grammar	Southeast
Kasim	Parent	Grant-maintained	Southeast
Kuzo	Pupil	Private	Southeast
Vinny	Parent	Grant-maintained	Southeast
Iain	Pupil	Grammar	Northwest
Theresa	Parent	Open-comprehensive	Northwest
Louise	Teacher	Grammar	Northwest
Donald	Pupil	Grant-maintained	Northwest
Sophia	Parent	Grammar	Southeast
Juan	Pupil	Open-comprehensive	Southeast
Janette	Parent	Private	Southeast
Joroz	Teacher	Open-comprehensive	Northwest
Stella	Parent	Private	Northwest
Mo	Teacher	Grammar	Southeast
Alice	Pupil	Grant-maintained	Northwest
Amina	Teacher	Open-comprehensive	Northwest
Kieran	Pupil	Private	Northwest
Elliott	Pupil	Grant-maintained	Northwest
Judith	Parent	Grammar	Northwest
Jennifer	Pupil	Private	Northwest
Asha	Pupil	Open-comprehensive	Northwest

Carl	Parent	Private	Southeast
Kantu	Pupil	Grant-maintained	Northwest
Tom	Teacher	Grammar	Southeast
Miranda	Pupil	Grant-maintained	Southeast
Jeremy	Teacher	Open-comprehensive	Southeast
Lorenzo	Teacher	Private	Southeast
Fidel	Teacher	Grammar	Northwest
Jaloka	Parent	Open-comprehensive	Southeast
Jessica	Pupil	Grammar	Southeast
Mark-Anthony	Pupil	Private	Southeast
Sandra	Teacher	Grant-maintained	Northwest
Robert	Parent	Open-comprehensive	Northwest
Ita	Parent	Grant-maintained	Southeast
Pritesh	Teacher	Private	Southeast
Christi	Pupil	Grammar	Northwest
Joe	Teacher	Private	Northwest
Selina	Parent	Grant-maintained	Northwest
Dee	Pupil	Open-comprehensive	Southeast
Wiktoria	Parent	Grammar	Northwest
Dylan	Pupil	Private	Southeast
Okelo	Parent	Private	Southeast
Sabiya	Teacher	Grant-maintained	Southeast
Lucas	Teacher	Grammar	Southeast
Naomi	Parent	Open-comprehensive	Northwest
Atalia	Pupil	Private	Northwest
Amanda	Teacher	Grammar	Southeast
Phillip	Pupil	Open-comprehensive	Northwest
Jason	Teacher	Grammar	Northwest
Michael	Parent	Grant-maintained	Northwest

Simon	Teacher	Open-comprehensive	Northwest
Vincent	Teacher	Private	Southeast
Tabitha	Pupil	Grant-maintained	Northwest
Rudolf	Teacher	Open-comprehensive	Northwest
Elizabeth	Parent	Open-comprehensive	Southeast
Samir	Parent	Grant-maintained	Northwest
Martin	Teacher	Grammar	Northwest
Steve	Parent	Open-comprehensive	Southeast
Angela	Teacher	Grant-maintained	Southeast
Phena	Pupil	Grammar	Southeast
Alex	Teacher	Private	Southeast
Siobhan	Pupil	Open-comprehensive	Southeast
Graham	Teacher	Grant-maintained	Northwest
Pamela	Parent	Grammar	Southeast
Denise	Parent	Grammar	Northwest
Nyabbo	Teacher	Private	Southeast
Toti	Pupil	Open-comprehensive	Northwest
Keith	Parent	Grammar	Southeast

4.3 RESEARCH METHOD

Data was collected using about 30-minute qualitative face-to-face or telephone interviews (see *interview schedule* in appendix one). The former was prioritised and only two telephone interviews were conducted. Despite being limited in sample representativeness, qualitative interviews were chosen because they are known to secure insight, thereby generating valid data. Since this is a topic which can attract very established opinions, especially, given the tribal nature of English politics, a qualitative method was deemed the best way to capture deeper reasons for opinion because of the opportunity for rapport. As Bourdieu (1977) and Thatcher and Halvorsrud (2016) have highlighted, *habitus* can be culturally/politically

bounded. This means that the norms, values or dispositions that form individuals' cultural inculcation can deeply influence their opinion on socio-political issues. As such, a method that allows for deeper conversations is the best way to access such dispositions.

The data collection process was conducted as follows:

- Interviews took place between January 2019 and January 2020.
- Participants were accessed via the leadership of selected schools as explained above.
- Each interview was preceded by a brief explanation of the egalitarian case.
- In-depth conversation on the egalitarian case and on each structure proposed for abandoning followed, opinion coded using *supportive, un-supportive* and *mixed* categories.

4.4 METHOD OF ANALYSING DATA

The collected data was analysed using two main categories linked to the research questions. It goes without saying that these two categories (opinion and reasons) were derived from my conviction that stakeholder perceptions would convey an *opinion* on the egalitarian proposal, and also contain a *reason(s)* for the position taken.

4.4.1 Opinion

This category was to help determine the nature of stakeholder position on the egalitarian proposal. It was based on my suspicion that stakeholder perceptions on the egalitarian proposal would either convey *support* for the proposal, be *un-supportive* or suggest a *mixed* position. Though the research instrument (see *appendix one*) may suggest that opinion was collected using *abolish, retain* and *not-sure* codes, stakeholder position on the proposal was only derived from their perceptions following the in-depth engagements that characterised the interviews, as opposed to a brief question and answer session that such categories might suggest. And, as

shown in the reported data in chapter five, I endeavoured to support stakeholder understanding of the rather complex egalitarian proposal through simplification of concepts, especially for pupils and some parents, use of probing style to help clarify any misunderstanding, and a continuous checking of understanding by directly asking respondents if they understood what I was asking them. Emerging perspectives were further analysed using possible *background influences* (school type/region), the aim being to identify possible patterns in stakeholder perspectives. As explained in chapter two, this was influenced by Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*, defined as the mind-set that being part of a culture generates. I suspected that stakeholder opinions might be influenced by their varied backgrounds. Bourdieu (1977) had argued that while *habitus* is unique to each individual, its extrapolation is legitimised through the argument that individuals from similar backgrounds/locations will have been exposed to a similar environment, leading to an increased chance that their habitus will be similar. Equally influencing the decision of *background* analysis was the understanding that in a democracy, the pattern of stakeholder opinion is key to gauging the proposal's reform viability. This is because politicians in democratic societies are elected to deliver on manifesto pledges. As such, their policies are only democratic if they reflect the specific circumstances/concerns/needs of the citizenry (Dewey 1916).

4.4.3 Reasons

As explained in chapters one and two, this category was derived from emerging perceptions and coded using two explanatory categories – *structural/egalitarian* and *meritocratic/individualist* accounts of social justice. The coding of the numerous 'reasons' identified in stakeholder perceptions using these broad explanatory categories was influenced by the fact that the egalitarian proposal considered in this research is really a response to the question of distributive justice – what is the 'just' way to distribute incoming educational opportunities? (Smith 2012). Whereas structural accounts are against hierarchical educational

structures because they blame educational inequality on wider socio-economic contingencies and particular organisation of school systems that lie beyond the agency of the individual, meritocratic explanations are sympathetic to individualist accounts of educational inequality, and support hierarchical school structures on the basis that a just social arrangement is one in which the allocation of distributive shares is based on the effort people put in to merit them (Smith 2012; Mijs 2019; Sandel 2020). Data emerging from stakeholder perceptions validated this coding. As shown in chapter five, the reasons (natural talent, hardwork, human nature, family background, etc) stakeholders advanced for their opinion broadly fitted into the categories of *structural* and *meritocratic* accounts of social justice.

4.5 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

4.5.1 Ethical approval

The decision to engage human participants in this research was approved by Lancaster University's Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences and Management School Research Ethics Committee (FASS-LUMS REC). I can also declare that this research was conducted in full compliance with Code of Practice and Procedures of the university as outlined in Research Ethics at Lancaster: a code of practice.

4.5.2 Consent

To ensure informed consent and voluntary participation of research participants, a comprehensive consent form was assented to by prospective participants. Parental consent was sought for prospective pupil participants and only those who secured such consent took part. This was necessary because since participants were accessed via schools, senior leadership/teacher/parent/pupil power relations could mean that some teachers, pupils, or parents felt that they had to take part. In addition, participant consent to be recorded was sought as I used audio recording to secure a more accurate transcription and quicker data collection.

4.5.3 Confidentiality/Anonymity

I believed that participant views on this topic might hurt their employment prospects, social status or the social ranking of the institutions they are linked to if identified. Or, that participants may feel vulnerable to being singled out for political views. To minimise such outcome or concern, all my research participants have been given pseudonyms and the schools I refer to are any. Moreover, all the recorded and transcribed data were securely locked away when not being analysed, and will be permanently destroyed after this thesis has been finalised. As for protection of privacy and possibility of being identified, face-to-face interviews took place in private environments where only the research participant and the researcher were present. In the case of pupil participants, the presence of a second adult (mainly a teacher) was ensured, albeit far away from the conversation.

Chapter Five – FINDINGS

The findings of this research are presented in two main parts: 1. Stakeholder **opinion** on the proposal to level England's hierarchical educational structures; and 2. The **reasons** advanced for such opinion. As explained in chapter four, what is labelled 'opinion' here may not be deemed the definitive opinions of stakeholders on this issue but were interpreted as their *de facto* positions from their comments on the egalitarian proposal. It was my conviction that attributing a definitive position to respondents on such a complex topic, even after an extensive conversation in which efforts were taken to enable a full understanding of the proposal, may not be just. Yet, on the basis of those same efforts, I took the view that the thrust of participant comments gave an insight into whether they held *supportive, unsupportive* or *mixed* views on the egalitarian proposal. Extracts from stakeholder perceptions below show examples of the kind of comments that received the *supportive, unsupportive* or *mixed* label.

> *Unsupportive*
>
> I understand what you are saying but this surely amounts to fixing what is already working. In my opinion, a larger number of pupils would be disadvantaged under your system *(Nyabbo, teacher, private school, southeast).*

The thrust of Nyabbo's passionate comments showed that she was *unsupportive* of the egalitarian conception of educational justice mainly because she believes that implementing the proposal would constitute 'fixing what is already working'. The proposed egalitarian structural arrangement, she argued, would disadvantage not only able pupils who would lose provision 'tailored to their level' but also weaker pupils who would struggle to cope in a fully comprehensive environment.

> *Supportive*
>
> Of course, it is common knowledge to policy makers, including to Tories, that family circumstances is the main determinant of educational outcomes. Yet this proposal will

> go nowhere. We are all neoliberals now! (*Juan, pupil, open-comprehensive, southeast*).

Despite appearing cynical about the proposal's ability to go beyond a mere academic rant given the neoliberal sweep over society, Juan indicated *support* for flatter educational structures decrying the system's 'deep unfairness', which makes family background 'the main determinant of educational outcomes'.

> *Mixed*
> This makes a lot of sense. Indeed, it is a matter of fact that choice of good schools is a reserve of well to do families…..the question however remains: Is this alternative system practical? (*Jeremy, teacher, open-comprehensive, Southeast*).

Jeremy's comments indicate a *mixed* opinion on the egalitarian conception of educational equity. Whilst acknowledging that the current structural arrangement secures choice only for 'well to do families', he wondered whether the egalitarian alternative would work in real life. He was concerned that a flatter structural arrangement would negate human nature, especially, 'now that we all know that communism doesn't work in practice'.

5.1 STAKEHOLDER **OPINION**

The research design endeavoured to capture, not only overall stakeholder opinion on the idea of an integrated school system in England (*sections 5.1.1 – 5.1.3*), but also their positions on specific structures proposed for abandoning (*sections 5.1.4 – 5.1.8*). As such, the egalitarian advocacy evidential pitch (outlined in chapter three), which explains how specific educational structures perpetuate/reproduce classist segregation, formed a key part of the conversation which pursued stakeholder position on the proposal.

5.1.1 Overall opinion by stakeholder-type

The overall pattern of stakeholder opinion by stakeholder-type shows that all stakeholder types are *unsupportive* of the egalitarian proposal by a big margin. However, whereas parents appear starkly *unsupportive* of an integrated school system, pupil and teacher comments indicate some *support* and a significant amount of *mixed* reaction to the idea. This research interprets this pattern as pitting those for whom the supposed 'injustice' of hierarchical structures may be more visible due to a more direct experience (teachers and pupils) against those for whom such 'injustice' may be more remote (parents) due to limited 'experience'.

Otherwise, the overwhelming rejection of the egalitarian proposal by all stakeholder types may be understood in two ways: First, because the specific question put to stakeholders was about school structures being unfair because they disproportionately secure educational advantage for the privileged, it can be said that this finding does not necessarily mean that stakeholders are opposed to educational outcomes being equal or fair, but rather that they don't see the said school structures as unfair. Indeed, as we can see in stakeholder comments in *section 5.2*, most of them deem the very structures the custodians of a merit-based system. Not only do they facilitate a fair system in which those deserving (through natural talent and/or 'hard-work') can access superior education (*Phena, Dee, Keith, Lucas, Sophia, Samir, Donald, Kuzo, Mo*), they also embody a diverse social arrangement which, other than preserving humanity's 'true' nature, engenders choice and competition, thereby securing educational standards for the benefit of all learners (*Michael, Joe, Christi, Ita, Sandra, Miranda*).

Secondly, as we will also see in *section 5.2*, the bases for stakeholder endorsement of hierarchical educational structures (natural talent, hard-work, etc) mirror a pervasive neoliberal outlook, which a recent YouGov (2011) poll revealed translates to 85 per cent of people across Britain believing that in a fair society income should depend on how hard people work and how talented they are. More recently, Jonathan Mijs (2019) has reported that there is a tendency

for unequal societies like the UK to believe in meritocracy (*fig. 6.1*). It is important to note that what might be going on here is not necessarily that stakeholders are consciously opposed to educational equity, but rather that the success of neoliberal narratives like meritocracy have normalised the view that those advantaged by structural 'injustice' deserve their fortune (Sandel 2020; Hickel 2020; de Botton 2019). Whether stakeholders are against educational equity or flatter educational structures, there is a strong indication that majority of them don't share in the egalitarian account of social justice which roots for an integrated school system as key to securing educational justice.

The evidence that this account of social justice has wider appeal has massive implications not only for the egalitarian proposal and/or educational reform, but also for wider socio-economic inequalities, especially given the fact that education is a key reproducer/perpetuator of such inequalities (Bourdieu 1986; Reay 2017).

5.1.2: Overall stakeholder opinion by regional background

As explained in chapter four, research participants were drawn from two English regions, believed to typify the English class and political divide: southeast (predominantly affluent and Conservative), northwest (predominantly working-class and Labour). Because of these characteristics, regional *background* was deemed a key theme in data analysis as this kind of class-affiliation seemed significant in influencing opinion on the proposal, at least in line with Bourdieusian *habitus*.

Against the hunch of a possible regional *habitus* influencing opinion on the proposal, analysis of collected data reveals a strong commitment to neoliberal school structures across the two regions. Yet, this research can at the same time reveal that majority of those offering opinions deemed *supportive* of the egalitarian proposal were from the northwest, and that a slightly

higher number of respondents holding *unsupportive* positions came from the southeast. Though negligible, the difference in *support* for the egalitarian proposal in favour of the northwest may be attributed to its character as a region where the 'injustice' of such structures may be more visible, especially, given its inferior economic standing and socialist tendencies (largely Labour) as explained in chapter four (Bourdieu's 1977). The opposite may explain the slightly larger *unsupportive* position in favour of the southeast, a region more known to be more affluent and Conservative. Otherwise, the commanding endorsement of these structures across the two regions is consistent with evidence of a pervasive neoliberal outlook across England (YouGov 2011; Curtis 2010), a possible case of *trans-habitus* (Thatcher and Halvorsrud 2016). In other words, opinion on this issue of distributive justice transcending regional or cultural boundaries.

5.1.3: Overall stakeholder opinion by school-type

School *background* was deemed a key theme for analysing research data because of the possibility of classed attitudes linked to school-type-affiliation influencing opinion on the egalitarian proposal. As explained in chapters two and four, such inclination too was influenced by the Bourdieusian *habitus*, the connection with classed access to school types coming from Bourdieu's (1986) claim that *habitus* as the internal organising mechanism intertwines social relations with the possession, accumulation and exchange of different capitals.

However, as with the *regional background* theme, data collected reveals limited variability regarding opinion about the proposal. Stakeholders of all *school backgrounds* overwhelmingly endorsed hierarchical structures (e.g. *Vincent, Pamela, Kasim* and *Siobhan*). However, it is curious that whilst data shows significant comfort with hierarchical school structures by stakeholders affiliated to private and grammar schools, it reveals some reservation with such

structures by those of open comprehensive and grant-maintained backgrounds. As explained in *section 5.2,* this research understands this pattern as typifying the main beneficiaries of hierarchical structures (private and grammar schools) against those who may not draw much from such structures – Bourdieusian *habitus* a key lens in understanding this pattern. In other words, affinity with school hierarchy may be linked to the inability to see the 'injustice' of such structures or a sense of entitlement necessitated by the neoliberal justifications of a stratified provision (Reay 2017; Sandel 2020).

Otherwise, the strong endorsement of hierarchical school structures across stakeholder types may be attributed to the strong legacy of the meritocratic narrative which explains success as earned, an emblem of virtue, and economic failure as denoting 'deficit' of some kind (Sandel 2020; Wilkinson and Pickett 2019). Respondent comments reveal that majority of stakeholders see these structures as enabling pupils/families to access an education worthy of their talents, hard work, etc.

5.1.4: Private schooling

What is your opinion on the proposal to abolish private schools in England?

The egalitarian argument that private schools[11] be abolished because they are the archetypal model of class-segregation in the English education system (Reay 2017; Benn 2018; Friedman et al 2016) was echoed by stakeholders like *Simon* and *Graham,* who wondered how a socially just education system could exist alongside a parallel one system 'principally for the rich' (*Simon*), or 'the kind of message we send about fairness when we allow an accident of birth to be the sole determinant of access to a very good education' *(Graham).* Yet, their argument was rejected by a large majority of respondents. As shown in participant comments in *section 5.2,*

[11] English fee-charging independent schools, widely known as public schools.

stakeholder endorsement of this structure was supported by the belief that those able to access private schools merit them either because their parents have 'worked hard' *(Dee, Pritesh, Stella, Donald)* or they are some kind of superior human being, the 'fittest' of Darwinian evolution (*Patricia*, *Janette*, *Tony*, *Vinny*, *Carl*). Regarding the latter, *Carl*, like many expressing support for hierarchical structures, anchored his comments on the 'failure of communism' and wondered why some people are still advocating 'a socialist worldview even as it is now proven that humans are not equal'. Wilkinson and Pickett (2009; 2019) and Michael Sandel (2020) attribute the tendency for some human beings to regard themselves as superior to the legacy of social ranking that typifies unequal societies or societies where the meritocratic justification of social inequality has been rigorously applied.

5.1.5: State-sector selection

What is your opinion on the proposal to abolish all forms of state-sector selection (e.g. through restrictions on entry like via the 11-plus exams)?

Like the other structures in this research, state-sector selection received a strong *unsupportive* opinion. Yet, this research can report that this structure recorded perhaps the lowest stakeholder support of the five structures, possibly signalling some dissatisfaction with the idea of selection in the state-sector. The comments of *Rudolf* brought this strongly home:

> It is scandalous that good schools even in the state-sector are for the well off. What we have in this country is comprehensive education in nothing but name.

Similar reservations can be seen in the comments of *Wiktoria* and *Phillip* in *Section 5.2.* Perhaps such hesitation captures the feelings surrounding the 1950s/60s clamour for comprehensivisation which was predicated on the view that state-sector selection is contradictory and defeats the logic of a fair national service, the notion of equal access being key (Reay 2017; Benn 2018). More recently, the Labour Party's idea of a National Education

Service (Corbyn 2019; Benn 2018) rekindled the view that state-sector educational provision should be uniformly accessible, 'free at the point of delivery' just like the NHS. Yet, the overwhelming endorsement in this research, even of state-sector hierarchy, reveals strong meritocratic inclinations, possibly necessitated by the growing neoliberal hold on society (Sayer 2015; Monbiot 2017).

Table 5.1.6: Setting and streaming in schools

What is your opinion on the proposal to abolish setting and streaming in English schools?

As shown in chapter three, egalitarians argue that despite evidence from Nordic countries showing that social mixing is hugely beneficial because it treats children as academic equals (Megir and Palme 2005), its equity vision as articulated by the egalitarian educationists of the 1950s and 1960s is today fatally undermined by endemic setting and streaming (Reay 2017). The structure's toll on feelings of equality was strongly evident in *Tabitha's mixed* position:

> To be honest, I personally often feel stupid when with my friends in top sets……well, I guess they are smarter, so, we really can't complain.

However, stakeholders resoundingly rejected the egalitarian proposal. There was little stakeholder-type/background variability in the opinion concerning this structure. As is also evident in *Tabitha's* comments, even students/parents associated with bottom sets or low ability streams seemed comfortable with the view that 'clever/hand-working' children need to be taught separately (*Liza*, *Elizabeth*, *Siobhan*), reflecting a strong belief that those in top sets/high-streams merit it, and as such deserve a better education. As *Elizabeth* put it: 'Ollie gets frustrated, switches off and misbehaves if teaching is not brought to his level……we realised this is why school was a nightmare for him at primary. It works for him here because they are taught in sets'.

Such views, as also expressed by stakeholders in *section 5.2*, capture what may be called the normalisation of the meritocratic narrative. Respondents seemed to consider it normal that children, because of the differences in their 'natural' ability, should be taught separately, either within the same schools (setting and streaming) or in separate schools (grammar schools). This is in order that educational provision be matched to natural ability (*Elizabeth, Tabitha, Ellie, Lucas, Phena*), and/or ii) learning is not disrupted by those lacking in potential (*Samir, Liza*). Buried in this inclination is the idea that talent should not go to waste, which was conveyed in *Samir's* comments: 'teaching all children together doesn't work for those who want to and have the ability to do well'. Such was the basis for the Tripartite System's 11-plus exam, and may be said to be a rationale behind the accountability regime which teacher *Sabiya* has referred to in the structure of setting and streaming in *section 5.2*.

5.1.7: School diversity

What is your opinion on the proposal to abolish diversity in provision by school type?

Egalitarian advocacy argues that the existence of a diversified school system in the English state-sector does not only perpetuate educational inequality through segregational practices in admission, but also undermines the comprehensivisation agenda (Allen and Higham 2018; Reay 2012, 2017). Such claims were vindicated by stakeholder *Steve's* comments: 'I resigned to the view that good schools, including church schools, are not for commoners like us'. *Steve* recounted how his efforts to have her daughter admitted at St. Richards (a successful Catholic school in the area) were futile, even after challenging 'the school's unfair admissions policy' at the local admissions tribunal.

The solution of flatter structures was rejected by majority of the respondents, continuing the trend of consistent dismissal, throughout this research, of the view that levelling hierarchical

structures is required for a socially just education system to emerge in England. Stakeholders indicated that they support a diverse school arrangement because they deem hierarchical structures key to preserving humanity's 'true' nature (*Michael*), and to engendering choice and competition, all crucial ingredients of educational standards and societal progress (*Ita, Miranda, Asha, Sandra, Martin*). Commitment to these bases can be seen in extracts from the comments of *Asha* and *Michael* below and of *Ita, Sandra, Martin* and *Miranda* in *section 5.2* and chapter 6.

> Having different schools makes sense because different people want different things in a school…...some families are catholic and they may want their child to go to a catholic school *(Asha).*

Whereas *Asha* predicates the necessity of school diversity on the value of school choice for a family's faith identity, *Michael* below rejects the egalitarian proposal on the basis that school diversity aligns to the natural state of humans as diverse, unequal beings.

> Sounds like a dream world in which everything is just bloody the same. It is not natural..…can't work in the real world *(Michael).*

It is important to note, therefore, that though the 'injustice' of diverse school structures was central to the conversation with respondents as part of expounding the egalitarian proposal, stakeholders seemed more preoccupied with how the structures enable children to merit incoming opportunities than with the structural injustices egalitarians claim they perpetuate. As evident in the contributions of *Ita* and *Sandra*, one gets the impression that the injustices of the said structures, which, *Phillip* and *Wiktoria* alluded to in *section 5.2*, is just something that the majority of stakeholders were either unable to comprehend or unwilling to engage with.

5.1.8: School choice

What is your opinion on the proposal to abolish school choice?

Despite the egalitarian contention that hierarchical educational structures secure choice only for the middle and upper classes (Gewirtz 1995; Ball 2003; Reay 2017), this was possibly the most endorsed of the five structures against the egalitarian proposal. Such findings reveal an overwhelming commitment to choice as one might expect in a broadly neoliberal society.

The strong preference for school choice by respondents was justified not only in terms of choice being a fundamental right in a democratic society (*Okelo, Kasim*), but also in terms of diverse school types offering the opportunity to align student ability and family identity/values to appropriate provision (*Ita, Christi, Michael*). As Kasim put it: 'As a parent I want my children to attend a school which I believe is good them. What you are talking about denies me that right.' Yet, as with other structures, even though stakeholders displayed a strong commitment to school choice, they seemed oblivious to the egalitarian claim that the structure of choice perpetuates educational injustice, especially, against the working classes who are left with the choices that the middle and upper classes do not want to make (Reay 2017). The double-edged nature of school choice was well articulated by Jeremy's *mixed* position:

> I am torn on this one. I am all for parental choice, yet I know that in this country currently translates to good schools being a reserve of affluent families.

5.2 **REASONS** FOR STAKEHOLDER OPINION

Data reported in *section 5.1* reveals that by all measures non-policy making stakeholder o*pinion* is overwhelmingly against the egalitarian proposal that recommends abandonment of hierarchical school structures in England. As explained in chapters one and four, this research analysed the numerous reasons given for stakeholder opinion on this proposal using two broad explanatory categories: *structural* and *meritocratic* accounts of social justice. Broadly speaking, the egalitarian proposal put to respondents relates to the question of *distributive justice* – what is the 'just' way to distribute incoming societal wealth and opportunities? (Smith

2012). The egalitarian educationist argues that the 'fair' way to allocate incoming educational opportunities is through the principle of *justice as equity* or by adopting a structural account of educational inequality. Structural accounts blame educational inequality on wider socio-economic contingencies, and particular organisation of school systems that lie beyond individual agency (Bourdieu 1984; Mijs 2016; Reay 2017). Accordingly, a fair school system is one that equalises individuals' educational opportunity in order to facilitate fairer outcomes (Smith 2012, Rawls 2001).

Meritocratic explanations, on the other hand, approach the question of distributive justice from the understanding of *justice as desert/merit*. Anchored on functionalist and neoliberal traditions, meritocratic explanations are sympathetic to individualist accounts of educational inequality, and argue that a just social arrangement is one in which the allocation of distributive shares is based on the effort people put in to earn them. As such, hierarchical educational landscapes are fair arrangements because they enable those with natural talent or are willing to work hard to merit superior education, and by implication, those lacking these attributes to get what they deserve (Mijs 2016; Sandel 2020).

As explained in chapter four, these two explanatory categories 'came through' in stakeholder comments as the central justifications for their positions on the egalitarian proposal. Analysis of stakeholder comments shows that majority of them conveyed meritocratic justifications of educational inequality as a basis for endorsing the current structural arrangement. This specific outcome calls for a reiteration of a point made severally in *section 5.1*, that whilst stakeholders may not be necessarily against educational equity, their being wedded to hierarchical school structures on meritocratic grounds leaves them largely ignorant of the 'injustices' that such structures may perpetuate. This inclination may be put down to England's pervasive neoliberal atmosphere which valorises individualist accounts of educational inequality whilst ignoring the

issues around socio-economic capital and structural aspects of the education system that mitigate against both achievement and 'aspiration' (Perry and Francis 2010; Reay 2017). As such, stakeholders are not to be deemed bad people who consciously support inequality. They just happen to live in a society where meritocratic accounts of social injustice permeate thinking and conceal the power of social structures in perpetuating privilege.

5.2.1 Meritocratic/individualist explanations

One key phrase captures the reasons given for the overwhelming stakeholder endorsement of England's hierarchical educational structures: tyranny of merit. Support for England's unequal educational landscape centred around the argument that the current structural arrangement is just because it is not based on feudal aristocracy, nepotism or bribery but on the idea that people get what they deserve – the principle of meritocracy (McCall 2013; Sandel 2020; Wilkinson and Pickett 2019). That the structures suggested for levelling help to create a fair environment in which those who are talented or work hard *merit* superior education, and those lacking in these can be relegated to learning arrangements that suit their desires/abilities/effort. It is really a question of children who show the greatest potential getting the best possible education so that 'talent does not go to waste', and of 'effort' earning individuals what they justly deserve.

5.2.1.1 Natural talent/Human nature

Respondents largely saw the egalitarian educationist proposal as a socialist levelling violence that is tantamount to stifling natural talent and negating humanity's hierarchical 'nature' (e.g. *Tabitha, Elizabeth, Michael, Tony, Patricia, Janette* and *Nyabbo*). Arguments of this nature were mainly echoed against elements of the proposal like setting and streaming, selection and private schooling. As can be seen in the comments below and those in *section 5.1*, stakeholder reasons for dismissing the egalitarian proposal revealed a strong commitment to a stratified

education system on the basis that people deserve certain social arrangements because it aligns to their nature – in terms of aptitude and/or as humans:

> This is another of the Left agendas that will always go nowhere. History has shown that socialism will never work because the human species is naturally hierarchical. Even in nature it is the fittest that survive *(Patricia, Parent, Private school, Northwest).*

Patricia, like Janette below echoes a central concern, especially of stakeholders linked to private and grammar schools, that flatter school structures would frustrate natural hierarchy, which is crafted such that only the 'fittest survive', a reason why socialism 'will never work'.

> That is just the way nature works. Tough! The unfit die out, the fit survive. What is actually unjust is correcting for it. I am told that the dangerous Marxist Corbyn wants to get rid of private schools. He should not be allowed anywhere near power. No one can stop the natural flow of things (*Janette, Parent, Private school, Southeast*)

Patricia and Janette were possibly the strongest advocates of the 'human nature' argument. They did not shy away from drawing what some might consider offensive parallels between the working-classes and the 'unfit' animals that Darwin's Natural Selection tells us nature weeds out. It was clear that both considered themselves superior human beings, a theme that seemed commonplace, especially, amongst stakeholders linked to private schooling. Janette literally shook with anger at the prospect of anyone daring to go against 'the natural flow of things' in the name of equality. One could almost 'feel' that she considered the egalitarian suggestion an existential threat to her family – an 'unjust' plot to deny her son his well-deserved opportunity, ironically an opportunity some may say current school structures deny many children of others. She strongly dismissed the validity of the bases for the egalitarian argument, alerting me of an upcoming anti-private school event that she would attend to 'challenge the socialist lie'. Egalitarian commentators like Wilkinson and Pickett (2019) and Michael Sandel (2018, 2020) attribute the tendency toward Social Darwinism to neoliberalism's legacy of social ranking, most visible in 'meritocratic hubris', the tendency for the beneficiaries of free-

market capitalism to predicate their success on their 'virtue', and by extension their superiority. Monbiot (2017) advises that we should expect this tendency more in Britain because it is perhaps the country where neoliberalism has been most rigorously applied in Europe.

The comments by Tony, Ellie and Liza below, reveal another of the central human nature arguments in support of hierarchical school structures. They are seen as fair because they ensure that 'talent does not go to waste', their hierarchy enabling natural ability to be matched to fitting educational provision (Mijs 2016). Such argument was mainly advanced to defend the structure of setting and streaming, reflecting the basis for England's tripartite system, and for what egalitarians consider, the reluctance to implement a fully-comprehensive school system in England (Reay 2017; Millar 2017).

> Human beings are not the same. Some are naturally more talented than others. Talented children will do worse if all schools turn fully comprehensive and setting is abolished. I would be worse off if I went to a normal school because the education I am receiving here suits my abilities (*Tony, Pupil, grammar school, Southeast).*

As articulated by Tony, stakeholders see uniform provision as an injustice against those who are naturally talented. They are believed to only thrive when provision is matched to their 'abilities'. However, as can also be seen with Ellie and Liza below, the irony was that stakeholders were so concerned about schooling being 'matched to natural ability' that they seemed unaware of the educational price and the psychological cost paid by those for whom such natural ability is deemed inferior and matched to sub-stand educational structures (Parsons and Hallam 2014; Reay 2017).

> Despite compelling arguments for mixed-ability teaching, it is a fact that students access the curriculum at different levels. Mixed-ability teaching disadvantages talented pupils because it holds them back as teacher time and energy is divided between meeting the needs of less-able students, dealing with adverse behaviour and stretching more-able students (*Ellie, Teacher, Grant-maintained, Southeast*).

Liza below seems to have unconsciously captured the educational cost and psychological despair of bottom sets. This confirms Reay (2017) and Parsons and Hallam's (2014) documentation of how apart from low sets being places of educational failure where children are written off as having no hope of succeeding, they are also places of psychological despair where the vast majority of working-class students endure a sense of powerlessness and worthlessness, opting to 'mess about' instead.

> I used to be so bad when I was in bottom sets. Like my mates then, all I did was mess about. But everyone knew I was naturally clever. So, my mum talked to my teachers who agreed to move me up if I promised to put my head down. Since I moved up my grades have got better. No one messes up in top sets. My mum says am doing well because I am taught with kids who are clever like me (*Liza, Pupil, Open-comprehensive, Northwest*).

These comments echo an earlier observation made in *section 5.1*. Stakeholder endorsement of hierarchical educational structures on the basis of this theme is better read, not as an approval of educational inequality, but more accurately in terms of meritocracy's ability to conceal the double-edged nature of hierarchical structures. For even though stakeholders can easily see how it is only fair that educational provision matches natural ability, they seem unable to understand that interpretation of such ability consigns some young people to sub-standard education and psychological despair.

5.2.1.2 Hard-work/Effort/Laziness

The popular neoliberal phrase for justifying inequality, 'hard-work' (de Botton 2020; Wilkinson and Pickett 2009, 2019; Mijs 2019), turned out to be a favoured meritocratic explanation in defence of hierarchical educational structures. Throughout stakeholder comments, the lingering view seemed to be that those who 'work hard' deserve better educational opportunities because they choose to invest their effort where others couldn't be

bothered. On the contrary, those unable to access superior educational opportunities deserve sub-standard education because they (or their parents) are 'lazy' or unambitious (*Donald, Kuzo, Theresa, Mo, Jessica, Amina*):

> Why should parents who have worked hard not be able to use their money to give their children better education? If you choose to be lazy then you should not complain when those who choose to work hard get good things (*Donald, Pupil, Grant-maintained school, Northwest*)

Donald was perhaps the most strident supporter of meritocracy, and definitely of the hard-work narrative. Not only did he echo the libertarian view that parents have a right to choose the best education for their children and that it is unfair and affront to their liberties to prevent them from doing so because they have worked hard (Hayek 1944; Sandel 2010), he wouldn't relent on the specific line that even if the individual 'meriting' better educational opportunities had themselves specifically not worked hard, their parents or grand-parents, and so on, did, revealing the unwavering commitment to this account of social justice via this theme.

> *Antone:* You don't want all schools to be the same because you think the rich have worked hard.
> *Donald:* Definitely!
> *Antone:* What do you say to the claim that most wealth is inherited wealth?
> *Donald:* How do you mean?
> *Antone:* That those able to afford private schooling, for example, probably inherited the money. So, their children are just lucky.
> *Donald:* Then their parents worked hard, so they still deserve it.
> *Antone:* It is possible that their parents inherited it too
> *Donald:* Then their grand-parents worked hard. You see, nothing comes for free. Money does not grow on trees. That is why I can never support Corbyn or socialism.

As demonstrated in Donald's unrelenting comments above and by Mijs (2016) research (*fig. 6.1*), such is the audacity of the 'hard-work'/meritocratic narrative. It is so 'common', and so entrenched that the less 'visible' and more nuanced structural account of social justice hardly gets a gaze, leading to the uniform 'hard-work' trope identified in this research, and which

Toynbee (2019) argues leads to even those on food banks blaming themselves for not having tried harder at school.

Like Donald, Kuzo's concern too was rooted in the injustice of denying those who have 'worked hard' the freedom to secure their children superior education, bringing to the fore yet another popular neoliberal trope connected to the 'hard-work' narrative: envy (Johnson 2013; Schweickart 1994). As Schweickart (1994) puts it, the passions that socialists mobilise to create an egalitarian social order 'shed easily into envy, envy of a particularly destructive sort' (p. 37). Kuzo mostly probably didn't mean it that way, but the fact that she labels envious the desire for equal structures by lazy 'people who couldn't be bothered', situates her comments right in the neoliberal understanding of a proposal like this.

> It would be grossly unfair if my parents who have worked so hard could be deprived of the freedom to use their money to give their child a good education just because some people who couldn't be bothered want things to be equal. It is just envy! (*Kuzo, Student, Private school, Southeast*)

Kuzo was keen to explain to me how it is 'hard-work' that secured her parents their current high social status (both medical doctors). Though she admitted that both her parents came from privileged backgrounds, she was eager to explain that her auntie had not done so well 'because she chose to be lazy and squandered the opportunities my grand-parents gave her'.

> *Antone:* So Kuzo, why are you so opposed to this idea of equal educational structures?
> *Kuzo:* Because it is unfair on those who have worked hard. If you work hard you should have the freedom to give your children a good education.
> *Antone:* What would you tell those who may say to you that you and your parents are just lucky. You are having a good education just like your parents because, like them, you were born into privilege which you don't deserve more than others who weren't.
> *Kuzo:* That is not exactly true (smiles nervously). Yes, my parents had well to do parents, but they worked hard to be what they are today. My auntie, for example, chose to care less. So why should her children have the same privileges?
> *Kuzo*: consider this example: someone told me it came from Trump's tweets. Though I don't like him, I think it is a good one.

Antone: tell me about it.

Kuzo: a young girl dares the dark and cold of winter to go 'trick or treating' on Halloween. Her sister refuses to go with her despite her pleading. However, on her return the same sister demands a share of the sweets. I don't think she should get any.

Antone: You think what is being proposed is similar to this?

Kuzo: Yes, definitely. If you don't work hard, you don't deserve the benefits of hard-work.

It is interesting that even as Kuzo tried her hardest to defend the 'hard-work' narrative, she ended up strongly confirming the role of structure (her privileged background and the structure of schooling) in securing for her an education which 93 per cent of English children cannot afford (Guardian 2017). This, once again, validates the view that it is the meritocratic rather than the structural account of social justice which pervades English 'public' thinking about educational inequality, even to the point of contradiction.

Others like Theresa brought to bear the standard individualist element of the hard-work narrative: *belief in a just world* tradition (Mijs 2016). Kind of: England has a fair educational landscape. Let those who choose to work hard access better educational opportunities, because it is really hard-work that makes the difference. The neoliberal trope that Britain is a fair society which in recent years assumed the strongest expression in the 'Fundamental British Values' (DfE 2012) took centre stage in these explanations. Like in the American Dream, evident in views like Theresa's was the power of politician-sanctioned narrative of a 'fair' Britain in holding 'public' opinion.

> This is one of the fairest countries in the world. You can't begin to imagine how bad it is in some countries. It doesn't matter what kind of school your child goes to. All our schools are good. Just tell those not doing well to try harder, and believe me, they will see magic. Our children know that only effort makes the difference. You can't do nothing and expect to do well. *(Theresa, Parent, Open-comprehensive, Northwest)*

Running concurrently with the 'hard-work' narrative were two commonly held 'deficit' elements of working-class culture: 'lack of ambition' and 'absence of a structured home life'

(Reay 2017; Bauman 2005), identifiable in the comments of stakeholders like Stella, Joroz, Pamela, and Atalia:

> Even if you make all schools the same, those located in working-class areas will still not do well because the working-class are not ambitious for their children and everyone knows their home life lacks structure *(Stella, Parent, Private school, Northwest*).

Like Joroz below, Stella here shifts blame of educational inequality away from the structures that the egalitarian earmarks for abolishment to the 'deficits' of working-class culture. And, like other stakeholders, it is not that Stella and Joroz are endorsing unfairness. They seem to genuinely believe that the system is fair, the source of educational inequality being the lack of ambition of working-class young people and their parents and the 'chaos' of their home life. Such confirms the running theme in stakeholder opinion, that as meritocracy's 'deficits' narrative of working-class culture takes hold of 'public' opinion, the structural account fades away from the educational justice debate.

> The reason why making schools similar is not the answer is the chaotic homes some of our children hail from. Around here, even schools from heaven will not work. The university professors putting forward this proposal have no grasp of reality. Tell them to sort out society first (*Joroz, Teacher, open-comprehensive, Northwest*).

Joroz had a lot to say on the specific issue of 'home-factors' frustrating educational success for the working-class. His response revealed the depth of the 'deficit' narrative.

> *Antone:* What do you mean by chaotic homes?
> *Joroz:* By chaotic homes I mean these children returning to homes where everything is dysfunctional: parents on alcohol and drugs; parents with serial partners; young people mostly in the streets getting their hands on all manner of stuff. You know what I mean! No school, no matter how great, can fix that. That is the job of society.
> *Antone:* What if all schools were good?
> *Joroz:* Those located here would turn bad. Guaranteed!

Then there was the argument (conveyed in the comments of stakeholders like Mo, Tom, Naomi and Michael) that hierarchical school structures inspire hard-work on the part of young people

and their families, and of institutions which get to emulate the 'good practice' of successful ones.

> The existence of hierarchical layers of schooling and teaching inspire hard-work and ambition on the part of pupils and their parents. It is also a standards mechanism as good schools have to keep up to survive (*Mo, Teacher, grammar school, Southeast*).

As in the case of the post-1988 marketisation and school diversity policy inclinations which predicated educational standards on hierarchy as a key ingredient (Allen and Higham 2018), non-policy stakeholders like Mo seemed wedded to the view that both individual and institutional 'hard-work', and by extension, standards, would struggle without structural hierarchy.

5.2.1.3 Social mobility

Some respondents rejected the egalitarian proposal on the basis that the current system has sufficient provision for improving the educational lot of the working classes. Superior education, they argued, is not just for the privileged alone but also for talented and hard-working children from poor backgrounds who are inspired and supported by the said hierarchical structures to 'escape' their 'unfortunate' socio-economic circumstances. This explanatory theme was mainly the domain of stakeholders linked to private and grammar schools, most of whom were keen to highlight the built-in philanthropic initiatives of these schools which support a good proportion of pupils from working-class backgrounds to rise (*Kieran, Judith, Amanda*). Others were eager to explain how superior structures do not just exemplify and inspire good practice, but also support local schools to follow in their footsteps (*Tom, Jennifer, Lucas*).

> I am aware that about 25% of students in this school are on bursaries given by the school. They are receiving quality education which their parents cannot afford. I'm

> told this is common practice by independent schools across the country. Why would anyone want to get rid of that? *(Kieran, Student, Private school, Northwest).*

Judith, like Kieran above, emphasises that the solution to the problem of educational inequality lies, not in levelling hierarchical school structures, but in supporting as many poor children as possible to access superior opportunities.

> You remove all grammar schools and you destroy any chance of poor clever kids like Jess ever dreaming of reaching their potential. Jessica is literally blossoming, thanks to Dorwen school. She now has a chance of making it in life despite our humble circumstances. *(Judith, Parent, Grammar school, Northwest)*

Then there was Tom, the Southeast grammar school head-teacher who wondered where local schools would be without the support his school gives.

> *Antone:* So, how come you are important to local schools
> *Tom:* Because we support them in so many ways, most of which are essential to the quality of the education they offer.
> *Antone:* Like?
> *Tom:* The obvious one is the teaching and learning mentoring of our colleagues in local schools. Then you can add the enrichment opportunities we run for gifted and talented pupils, and the sports and performing arts resources local schools have access to, among others! Our exceptional resources are not just for our pupils.

It was ironical that whilst Tom hailed the contribution made by grammar schools to improving local educational quality, he saw as utopian any suggestion that efforts should be made to make all state schools great, once again exposing the meritocratic account blind spot.

> *Antone:* Wouldn't it be even better if all schools were great like yours.
> *Tom:* That will never happen. You see the elephant in the room is society. The excellence you see here is only possible because of the homes our students hail from.
> *Antone:* So, the secret is in who you admit?
> *Tom:* In a way, yes. But what I really mean is that not all schools can be great because not all homes are great. Even in schools where we are making a difference, we are only impacting on some pupils.

Though one could easily argue that stakeholders defending hierarchical structures on social mobility/philanthropic grounds are only doing so because they happen to be beneficiaries of what they see as a natural hierarchy, the fact that such views cut across all stakeholder types and backgrounds (these themes also conveyed in comments of Miranda, Samir, Penny, Siobhan, Vinny) makes them attributable more to the strong legacy of meritocratic explanations of social inequality (Sandel 2020; de Botton 2019; Wilkinson and Pickett 2009, 2019; Hickel 2021), and not to a selfish hoarding of educational opportunity by the privileged.

5.2.1.4 Innovation/creativity

Innovation/creativity made the list of key meritocratic themes conveyed in respondent comments against the egalitarian proposal. Stakeholders saw levelling educational structures as tantamount to stifling the innovative/creative attitudes that hierarchy-inspired competition brings (*Miranda*, *Sandra*, *Martin*, *Michael*, *Pritesh*). There was a consistent view by those advancing this explanatory theme that a good and enriching curriculum is a product of creative innovation which is generated by competition between hierarchical structures. In other words, when bad reputation is costly and excellence is rewarded, institutions will seek to secure creative advantage. As such, stakeholders saw the egalitarian proposal as producing 'boring' institutions that suck out of schooling the high-octane competition that secures educational quality. Stakeholders advanced this theme mainly in defence of the structure of school diversity:

> If all schools are the same then all schools will be bad. No school will try hard to be good. Everyone knows our school is bad but we are trying to be like good schools like Rexon High. Clever kids go there and our school would prefer that they came here instead *(Miranda, Student, Grant-maintained, Southeast)*

Miranda, a sponsored-academy student, had a lot to say when I engaged her on some specifics:

> *Antone*: So how do you know your school is bad?

Miranda: Because clever kids don't come here. They go to Rexon High. Here most kids just mess about, lessons are really boring.

Antone: Really?

Miranda: Yes. And, apparently Ofsted gave us a rubbish grade.

Antone: So, you think your school has given up?

Miranda: No. We want to be like Rexon or better. They have been saying in assemblies that we are going to be great.

Antone: Do you believe them?

Miranda: Yes. There is a new head-teacher. The old one was so bad! And they have added new teachers. Some are awesome. I hear they are going to build new things, like new dining and stuff. We are going to be like than Rexon, I recon.

Miranda captures the central rationale of the post-1988 marketisation agenda. Though most certainly unconsciously, she implies that educational standards are only possible via cut-throat competition necessitated by school diversity and institutional creativity. Yet, as we will see in chapter six, evidence shows that the opposite is the case – it is flatter structures, as least in the case of Finland, which are better at securing educational standards (Shepherd 2010a).

For teacher Sandra too, there was no doubt that innovative curriculum design and quality is driven by the market pressure to maintain a competitive advantage. But not just that. She was concerned about the demise of consumer choice in the absence of diversity.

> Make all schools the same and you kill quality. Simple as that! Where will the impetus to try harder come from when you know you just need to be the same as the school next door. What will happen to school choice which depends on the diverse ways in which schools can re-invent and re-organise the curriculum? How will society progress without the creative innovation that competition inspires *(Sandra, Teacher, Grant-maintained school, Northwest)*

Like Miranda above, Sandra predicates educational standards on the competition generated by school creativity. Her tone suggests that educational quality is impossible without competitive curriculum innovation.

5.2.1.5 Choice/diversity/identity

A number of respondents rejected the egalitarian proposal arguing that since flat structures cannot deliver school diversity, school choice is by default eliminated (*Ita, Jaloka, Christi, Asha, Selina, Denise, Jason, Nyabbo*). For these stakeholders, such outcome is unfathomable because social institutions should reflect the complex and diverse social life so that families can choose schools that best meet their children's specific needs. As such, given the logical connection between choice and diversity, respondents saw in school diversification the opportunity to align family identity with school identity. And, though references were made to the importance of schools reflecting the local or family/'academic' identity (*Christi, Jason*), it was the faith identity that formed the central argumentation for rejecting the egalitarian proposal under this theme (*Ita, Asha, Nyabbo*). Respondents saw schools fashioned after their faith identity as the next stage of the faith formation already began in the family. Moreover, as discussed under *section 5.2.1.2* above, key to choice too was the stakeholder emphasis on the freedom to use 'hard-earned' family resources to give one's child a fitting education (*Donald, Kuzo*). Stakeholders were concerned that flatter structures would constitute an injustice because they would frustrate these noble ends. Ita here below articulates the crucial role of diverse school structures in promoting family faith identity.

> If the idea of common school means that there will be no faith schools then I am out. We are first and foremost Catholic. Everything else flows from that. My children must be educated in a Catholic school. It is a family thing that is deeply-rooted in our Irish heritage. *(Ita, Parent, Grant-maintained school, Southeast)*

Ita constantly underscored the importance of catholic schools her family identity/values:

> *Antone:* So why is school choice so important to you?
>
> *Ita:* It is really about my children continuing the faith journey we began in the family. Because Matt and Steph were able to get into St. John's, they have been supported to develop into well-rounded young adults.
>
> *Antone:* What is your response to those who argue that it is not fair that the good education Catholic schools offer is mostly unavailable to non-Catholic pupils.

Ita: What do you expect if you are only interested in the good education but not the faith. You shouldn't get in. Those schools are there for something greater than the good education they offer. That something is what should get you in. Good education is a bonus. And do you know why they are always the best?

Antone: No. Why?

Ita: Their firm foundation in the Gospel of Christ. The Gospel of love, dignity, forgiveness and hope. That is the foundation of a good education.

For Ita, as with other stakeholders defending this meritocratic theme, the focus on diverse structures being enablers of family choice/identity was so strong that it made ridiculous the structural injustice encapsulated in the egalitarian complaint. Though not intending an injustice, Ita in the above conversation ironically thought it preposterous that anyone could champion equal access for non-Catholics (as *Steve* implied) to what are actually taxpayer funded Catholic schools.

For Christi and his family, the presence of a wide range of schools made choice fun and a real asset at age 10. It made them focus on what they really wanted as a family for his education. 'Different families want different things in a school', parent Jaloka had argued in defence of school diversity. 'It is important that there is choice for the young person and their family so that they can opt for a school that best suits their needs and values'. So, explained Christi, now 15:

> Initially I wanted to go to the local school where most of my mates went. They had been good friends since we were little and I didn't want to go to a school where I had no friends. But then my mum said that it was not about my mates but my education. So, we sat down and looked at different schools. None of them was great. It was then that we decided that I would try getting into a grammar school. We realised we had to move house to get in. We moved, then my parents got me tutor for my entry exams, which I passed. It was a great decision. Education here is great and I have made many new friends. *(Christi, Student, Grammar school, Northwest)*

Christi confirms, rather unconsciously, that his family's preferred choice of grammar school was delivered by economic capital (the ability to move house and to afford private tuition), a choice not available to those lacking is such capital (Bourdieu 1984). Yet, Christi, in benefiting from the structure of choice and school diversity, did not come across as even aware that a large majority of other children are unable to exercise such choice due to their lack of economic capital. As discussed in chapter six, this shows that in neoliberal societies, the meritocratic account almost always conceals the structural explanation of social justice. As Ball (2003) says, in such environments, understanding structural injustice requires effort and expertise.

The next section presents reasons conveyed by a minority of stakeholders in their comments on the egalitarian conception of education.

5.2.2 Structural explanations

The reasons given for stakeholder opinion under this category mirrored the case put forward by the egalitarian advocacy – the view that class-based educational inequality is a product of the structure of society and the organisation of schooling that operates beyond the power of the individual. As shown in *section 5.1* and this section, these explanations were mainly advanced by stakeholders offering comments deemed *mixed* or *supportive* of the egalitarian case, i.e. mainly by pupil and teacher stakeholders (*e.g. Graham, Rudolf, Simon, Jeremy, Toti, Juan*), stakeholders hailing from the northwest region (e.g. *Wiktoria, Tabitha, Fidel, Louise*), and those of grant-maintained and open comprehensive backgrounds (*e.g. Elliott, Sabiya, Steve, Simon, Joroz*).

5.2.2.1 Socio-economic capital

Socio-economic capital as an umbrella structural theme in this research explains class-based educational inequality in terms of elements of the structure of society such as family material status, parents' education, language, nutrition, and private tuition that are the source of

educational advantage for some children. Respondents implied in their perceptions that children thrive in school if they have socio-economic capital, i.e. if they or their parents possess the material resources, or attitudes and values that warrant a competitive advantage in the field of education (*Alice, Wiktoria, Juan, Jeremy*). Such themes are in line with the egalitarian claim that the hierarchical structure of schooling enables family privilege to reproduce itself (Bourdieu 1986; Friedman et al 2016; Reay 2017). In the conversation below, *Alice* makes a strong reference to the difference educated parents can make to one's educational chances, underlying the argument that educational success may largely be down to who one's parents happen to be:

> It is pressure, pressure at home. Not like at my mate Lucia's. Though sometime I have a row with my mum over it, I understand what they are doing. My parents want me to be like them when I grow up. So, they care a lot about my education *(Alice, Student, Grant-maintained school, Northwest).*

A large body of research shows that parents' education is perhaps the most important factor affecting children's achievement. Educated parents, who tend to be middle-class, are able to give their children an advantage by how they socialise them, and the amount of time and material resources they invest in their education (Bernstein and Young 1967; Feinstein 2008; Gewirtz 1995). Such was evident in Alice's comments:

> *Antone:* What do you mean 'not like at my mate Lucia's'?
> *Alice:* Because her parents are not bothered. No one checks if she has done her homework. She doesn't get into trouble at home if she is naughty at school. She does whatever she wants.
> *Antone:* How is your situation different?
> *Alice:* My parents bother about everything, especially mum. They stress over my homework, check with my teachers how I am doing. They got me a maths tutor.
> *Antone:* You said they want you to be like them when you grow up. In what way?
> *Alice:* Like they want me to go to uni and have a career like them. My dad in an engineer and my mum is a senior nurse.
> *Antone:* Whose career do you fancy?
> *Alice:* Dad's. He says there are not many women engineers. That I would do well if I became

one. That is why they got me a tutor. Dad says I need maths.

For parent Wiktoria, the grammar school education her two daughters are receiving is down to her family's strong economic status, herself an educational psychologist and her husband a chartered accountant. Though she admitted that she had taken advantage of England's hierarchical school structure to give her children a good education, Wiktoria explained that as a European she had struggled with the idea of state-sector selection.

> What I am going to say next is going to sound very hypocritical, and of course it is hypocritical. I have, not just one but two daughters in this school. Over the years, we have put in a lot of money to get them here. I am acutely aware that a lot of families cannot afford that. As we prepared my second daughter to get in, the unfairness of it all just hit me. How could one justify a tax-payer funded education for the well-off? As a European I am not okay with that, may be the English are (*Wiktoria, Parent, grammar school, Northwest*)

Wiktoria strongly distanced herself from the 'English culture's comfort' with 'getting the best for your own child at the expense of other people's children' (Reay 2012, p.591) terming it anti-European.

> *Antone:* what is really unfair about grammar schools?
> *Wiktoria:* because it is state-funded education for the wealthy.
> *Antone:* but you are obviously benefiting from it
> *Wiktoria:* that is why I said earlier that my opinion is hypocritical.
> *Antone:* and what does being European have to do with it?
> *Wiktoria:* well I was mostly educated in Poland and I don't recall that kind of thing in our school system. Europeans are generally not comfortable with that kind of thing.
> *Wiktoria*: I can deal with the idea of private schools, even that, just! but not with allowing money to dictate access in the state-sector. I don't know whether it is just me but I find the whole idea morally repugnant.
> *Antone:* so you think it is all down to money, yet you are comfortable with the idea of private schools?
> *Wiktoria:* of course it is all down to money. It has cost us a lot to get the girls to a grammar school. Most families cannot afford that. And, I didn't say I am comfortable with private schools. I can deal with it but I cannot vote for it.

Antone: how come you can deal with private schools but not grammar schools?

Wiktoria: Because unlike grammar schools, private schools are not fully-funded by the tax-payer.

Wiktoria's comments highlight three important elements of the egalitarian complaint. The first concerns the obvious fact, highlighted throughout this research, that even in the English state-sector it is socio-economic capital that secures superior education (Millar 2017; Benn 2018; Reay 2017). She was acutely aware that her two girls were only able to pass the grammar school entry exams due to a protracted private tuition, a privilege that children from wealthy English families are twice as likely to have compared to their disadvantaged peers (Kirby 2016). The second point, which is fundamentally tied to her first, is her discomfort with the 'idea of a tax-payer education for the well-off'. Wiktoria finds morally repugnant the idea that a state-funded education could mainly benefit the wealthy. Evidence that the tripartite system was perpetuating this kind of social reproduction was the basis for the 1950s/1960s clamour for a full-comprehensive system (Ben 2018; Reay 2017). The final point we can pick from Wiktoria's comments is her claim that unlike Europeans, there is something fundamentally English about being comfortable with selection or hierarchical educational structures. Indeed, the findings of this research, which put state-sector school diversification *retain* vote at an average of 87 per cent vindicate her views. Her views of a systemic comfort with classist structures is also consistent with evidence of English education reform being characterised by stopgap interventions that leave hierarchical structures intact even as policy makers admit the damaging intractability of the class-gap (Perry and Francis 2010; Gove 2010; May 2016). As for her bold claim that Europeans are less tolerant of class-based structures, this too is consistent with an OECD (2013) report indicating that schools in England are amongst the most socially segregated in the developed world.

5.2.2.2 Organisation of schooling

Organisation of schooling became a key explanatory theme for stakeholders supporting the proposal to level educational structures. Respondents blamed educational inequality on similar structures as those identified by the egalitarian protagonists, viz: setting and steaming, school diversity, school choice, private schooling, and selection (*Sabiya, Phillip, Wiktoria, Jeremy, Rudolf, Steve, Tabitha, Toti*):

> I can testify that as far as ability-setting is concerned, schools don't care that much about those in bottom-sets. In the race for a good league-table ranking, the best resources are deployed to ensure that those who can pass will pass. Unfortunately, those in bottom-sets are not in this category *(Sabiya, Teacher, Grant-maintained, Southeast)*.

Here, Sabiya explains how far from individual agency, the structure of setting and streaming goes a long way in securing academic success for the lucky few who happen to access top-sets. Her perceptions are vindicated by evidence showing that top-sets are largely the domain of middle-class young people (Gillborn and Youdell 2000; Reay 2017; Parsons and Hallam 2014).

Talking to Phillip, it was clear that the structure of school diversity as a celebrated source of educational equality and standards is compromised by the resources that accompany choice:

> My mate, Joe, who went to a grammar school is definitely receiving better education than me. He sounds so different. Not normal like my mates at Atley High. Like fucking intelligent. Really geeky and kind of twisted (laughs!). Me and my other mates couldn't get that chance *(Phillip, Student, Open-comprehensive, Northwest).*

Other structural determinants of educational inequality came to the surface when I engaged Phillip on specifics. It turns out that due to variability in access to information and material circumstances, 'choice' as a neoliberal obsession, is not available to some families (Reay 2017). Not only was Phillip's choice impossible because he did not even know that such a thing as grammar schools exists, such choice was equally unavailable because his material

circumstances already selected him out anyway – both in terms of material resources required to pass the 11-plus exam, and in terms of accessing the catchment area of a grammar school. So, diversity in hierarchical structures really just delivers segregation, especially, if, as intended by the 1988 ERA, the rationale of school diversity is educational standards delivered by school choice (Allen and Higham 2018):

> *Antone:* How come you never went to a grammar school?
> *Phillip:* We didn't even know such a thing existed until Joe told us about it.
> *Antone:* Who is we?
> *Phillip:* Me, my parents and my mates.
> *Antone:* Would you have considered a grammar school if you had known about them?
> *Phillip:* Not a fucking chance!
> *Antone:* Why not? You said they offer better education, and you are kind of regretting you didn't get that chance.
> *Phillip:* Because I ain't clever, and we ain't rich?
> *Antone:* What does being clever or rich have to do with grammar schooling?
> *Phillip:* Because Joe told me that the reason they moved to the posh place where they live now was to get in. We can't even afford the shed we live in.
> *Antone:* And the cleverness stuff?
> *Phillip:* I know from the way he talks that I can't cope there. You got to be a geek to go there. They have no life in such places.
> *Antone:* So, you think there should be schools for clever people and for those who are not clever?
> *Phillip:* I am not saying that at all. I think it is not fair that some people get that chance but others like me don't. Maybe I would turn clever if Atley was good.

For teacher Simon it was the 'indefensible' existence of the structure of private schooling that captures 'the real story of English educational inequality'. An ardent socialist, Simon was convinced that the end was nigh for private schools with the 'impending Labour government' under Jeremy Corbyn (as the 2019 General Election approached).

> I can't wait for the Labour government under Jeremy Corbyn to stop all this wound-dressing and make education a real right for all our children. Corbyn has pledged to bring to an end that posh boys' club called private schools. No matter how much you sugar-coat it, we all know who goes there and which positions in society they end up occupying *(Simon, Teacher, Open-comprehensive school, Northwest).*

Simon's strong views got starker as our conversation progressed, especially, on the issue of the imminent demise of private schools under Corbyn's Labour government:

> *Antone:* So, what is really wrong with private schools?
> *Simon:* Because you can't have educational equality with them in existence.
> *Antone:* Why not?
> *Simon:* Because you got to have a lot of money to get in. A lot of it. Unfortunately, many people don't have a lot of money. So, it is just a very good education for the few, not the many, as Corbyn would put it (laughs nervously).
> *Antone:* What is wrong with that?
> *Simon:* Then don't talk about a fair education system if you are comfortable with that. The problem with this country is that they insist that education is equal when clearly it is not. The best example of why English education is not equal is private schools.
> *Antone:* What would you tell those who say these schools do a lot of good in the community.
> *Simon:* Like?
> *Antone:* They epitomise educational quality which other schools can emulate, and they support local schools in so many different ways. Some also say they give bursary to a good number of young people from poor backgrounds.
> *Simon:* Go tell that to the birds. Looks like you think our children are worth just little tokens of favour. Hopefully you won't fool people any longer.

Simon appeared to have formed the opinion that I was a capitalist, possibly due to how I framed the questions. His parting words finely captured the core stance of the structural account of social justice:

> I hope you bear this in mind Antone as you go about wound-dressing capitalism. *'Socialism doesn't mean taking wealth from those who work hard and giving it to those who don't. You are thinking of capitalism'*. I saw this quote somewhere, and my God, it is so true.

Yet, his comments merge with the egalitarian conviction that private schools epitomise segregated education and elitism (Reay 2017; Benn 2018). With them in existence, argues Simon, talk of educational equality amounts to 'wound-dressing' or 'sugar-coating', an attempt to conceal the fact that such very good education is for the few, not the many.

Such then were the reasons conveyed in stakeholder comments for their positions on an egalitarian school system. A pervasive neoliberal atmosphere in England means that there is

little sympathy for a ‘socialist’ proposal like this one. The next chapter discusses the reasons for the success of the meritocratic narrative, the morality of its claims and the implications of its tyranny for educational reform and wider socio-economic inequalities. Explored in conjunction with this is the fate of the egalitarian proposal given its rejection by the majority of educational stakeholders engaged in the course of research.

Chapter Six – DISCUSSION

6.1 THE TYRANNY OF MERITOCRACY

The data presented in chapter five shows that by all measures, educational stakeholders favour meritocratic explanations of the English class-gap over the egalitarian structural account. A large majority of stakeholders engaged in the course of this research variously suggested that educational inequality is the outcome of a fair, meritocratic process whereby societal success simply reflects talent, ambition and hard-work (e.g. *Nyabbo, Theresa, Kuzo, Donald, Joroz, Tony, Stella*). As such, individuals only have themselves to blame for not being able to succeed in a 'fair' educational field (e.g. *Theresa, Kuzo, Jennifer, Penny*). Those who fail, do so, not because of some structural barrier impeding their educational success, but because they harbour some personal or cultural deficit – they are not hard-working or lack motivation/ambition (e.g. *Carl, Stella, Robert, Kuzo, Donald, Michael*); they hail from non-aspirational home environments (e.g. *Joroz, Stella, Okelo, Sophia*); or they are without natural talent (e.g. *Patricia, Tony, Ellie, Liza, Angela*). Ideally, the meritocratic trope has it that people sink through their own fault or rise through merit. Accordingly, hierarchical educational structures are necessary because apart from inspiring hard work, they ensure that individuals get what they justly deserve (e.g. *Mo, Miranda, Judith, Tom*).

Such findings reflect the pervasive public and policy preference for merit (desert) as the principle of distributive justice, which research shows correlates with tolerance of inequality (Bucca 2016; Mijs 2019). Labelling it the 'paradox of inequality', Mijs (2019) reports that despite the dramatic rise in inequality in the West in recent decades, citizens in unequal societies have become more supportive of meritocracy (*fig. 6.1*). He draws on 25 years of International Social Survey Program data to explain that rising inequality is legitimised by the popular belief that the income/wealth gap is meritocratically deserved: the more unequal a

society, the more likely its citizens are to explain success in meritocratic terms, and the less important they deem structural factors such as a person's family wealth or connections. Given the evidence that UK is one of the most unequal countries in the OECD (Wilkinson and Picket 2009, 2019; Joyce and Xu 2019), the endorsement of hierarchical educational structures on meritocratic grounds by a large majority of respondents in this research (*tables 5.1-5.3*, *sections 5.1* and *5.2*) may not be surprising.

Figure 6.1: **Income inequality and Belief in Meritocracy**

- *X-axis:* Belief in meritocracy over time
- *Y-axis:* Approximate percentage of citizens, for each country and period, who believe that getting ahead in society is decided by hard-work.

Figure 6.1 shows the trend in meritocratic beliefs in different countries between 1987–2012. Indicated for each country and time point is the average score that citizens attributed to hard-work in determining who gets ahead in society. Across the board, the West is marked by a striking convergence in citizens' strong belief that success depends on hard-work. In the majority of the most recent surveys, at least two-thirds of citizens in all countries – and as much as 95% of Americans – attribute success to meritocratic factors.

Source: Mijs (2019)

The term *Meritocracy* has its origins in the British sociologist Michael Young's 1958-acclaimed work, *The Rise of Meritocracy.* In this dystopian work of fiction, Young coined the concept as an ostensible analysis written in 2034 by a historian looking back at the development over the decades of a new British society governed by the principle of 'selection by merit'

(post-feudal aristocracy). In that distant future, riches and rule were earned, not inherited. The new ruling class was determined, wrote the author, by the formula 'IQ + effort = merit'; and democracy gave way to rule by the cleverest – 'not an aristocracy of birth, not a plutocracy of wealth, but a true meritocracy of talent'. Young was writing at a time when the British class system was breaking down (or so it was thought), giving way to a system of educational and professional advancement based on merit. This was thought to be a good thing because it enabled gifted children of the working-class to develop their talents and escape a life consigned to manual labour. Meritocracy, it was thought, would thus provide a fair basis for the allocation of reward, namely, achievement, as opposed to the old encrustations of inherited hierarchies. Achievement, furthermore, would be a function of natural ability and effort. Young, in *The Rise of Meritocracy*, expressed this idea in the formula M = I + E, where M is merit, I is natural endowments (in particular IQ) and E is effort. Indeed, as shown in stakeholder comments in sections 5.1 and 5.2, looks like Young's prediction arrived just under two decades earlier. Turns out that *hard-work* and *natural talent* are today prominent meritocratic themes in defence of hierarchical educational structures, their popularity possibly explaining why they made their way into Young's formula for merit. Below are some memorable lines capturing the natural status of these two meritocratic themes as defence of a stratified provision:

- **Natural talent**: there is no denying that some people are cleverer than others (*Elliott*). They are smarter, so really can't complain that we are taught separately (*Tabitha*). Human beings are not the same (*Tony*). Mixed ability teaching sounds good to the ears but, believe me, no one benefits from it (*Amina*). Ollie gets frustrated, switches off and misbehaves if teaching is not brought to his level (*Elizabeth*).

- **Hard work**: I know for sure that my family has worked hard to get to where we are (*Keith*). I do better than my friends in assessments because of my strong work ethic (*Atalia*). If you don't work hard you don't deserve the benefits of hard work (*Kuzo*).

Although Young's fictional satire focused more on the darker side of meritocracy, the reception of meritocracy has not always been critical of the principle as Young himself was. The principle has found abundant support and now settles in a comfortable position in education, economics, sports and other spheres of life, as a workable and the ultimate principle for allocating reward and societal development (Sandel 2020). We can see this principle in use throughout the English Education system: in the post-Second World War tripartite system of grammar and secondary modern schools; in the division of vocational and academic qualifications; in the contemporary marketisation programmes, e.g. in school diversification, and in the high-stakes testing and school accountability regimes (Mijs 2016). The tripartite system, for example, was influenced by the idea that individuals should achieve their status in life through their own efforts and abilities, rather than it being ascribed at birth by their class background (Webb et al. 2015). Thence, as is also expressed by respondent views in *sections 5.1 and 5.2*, the idea was of matching educational provision to natural talent, hence, the rationale of the 11-plus exam. It may be argued that this uncritical reception of meritocracy is partly what has occasioned its pervasiveness as the 'natural' explanation of social inequality. Such was evident in the certainty with which respondents advanced meritocratic themes like 'hard-work' to defend meritocratic practice. Indeed, as can be seen in *Donald*'s comments, most respondents were perplexed that an alternative explanation could even be contemplated, leading to the apparent anger or strong language employed by respondents like *Carl*, *Janette*, *Kuzo* and *Patricia*, against any attempt to exonerate the 'loser' from blame. As such, meritocracy's dominant status as the 'natural' explanation of social inequality can be said to have succeeded in masking the more nuanced but rather remote structural account of the same, making it difficult to equate stakeholder endorsement of hierarchical educational structures on meritocratic grounds to endorsement of educational inequality.

But, what else might explain meritocracy's popularity and unrivalled success in justifying social inequality apart from its uncritical reception? Indeed, the progressives are perplexed that rising inequality hasn't led to much sign of the oppressed rising up, either at the ballot box or through more physical acts of protest, but has on the contrary consolidated the meritocratic faith. One would have thought, argues Toynbee (2019), that stagnated wage levels, and growth of non-unionised, achingly hard, zero-hour job conditions, and a highly stratified educational landscape, would open people's eyes to see the structural forces behind inequality. Social scientists have identified a number of possible reasons for the meritocracy's prominent place in public and policy discourse, among them being: 1) affinity with the 'belief in a just world' tradition; 2) interest of powerful groups in society; and 3) the role of experiences (Mijs 2016).

The 'belief in a just world' perspective posits a universal psychological tendency to believe that inequalities reflect individual effort/choices, that people can design their destiny as they see fit. This allows people to maintain their belief that they live in a fair world rather than having to address inequities (Lerner 1980; Be´nabou and Tirole 2006). Indeed, as we saw with respondents like Theresa, Donald and Kuzo, 'belief in a just world' is a key driver of individualist accounts of social inequality. So, the argument goes: the system is fair, inequality is due to variability in individual effort/ability. Theresa described England as one of the fairest countries, where all schools are good. All that is needed is hard-work and all else falls into place. Similar convictions were evident in the comments of stakeholders like Dee, Samir and Alice, all of which defended the structure of setting and streaming via the hard-work narrative. Jonathan Mijs (2016) offers a detailed analysis of what the concept of meritocracy entailed in Young's formulation which may explain its affinity with the 'belief in a just world' tradition: (i) Careers open to talents. This element reflects the call to open up positions to those who display competence, rather than award positions through nepotism, bribery and the like – a call that was heard in the French Revolution and has been a hallmark of modernity ever since.

Respondents indicated that they deem meritocracy to have crushed the idea of basing access to incoming social opportunities on inherited hierarchies by making effort the only thing that counts. This was acutely captured by Theresa: 'Just tell those not doing well at school to try harder, and believe me, they will see magic'; and, Kantu too, underlining the primacy of effort, quipped: 'the daughter of our MP comes here and, guess what, I am in better sets than her'; (ii) Educational opportunity matched to natural ability. The second element refers to the process of testing and selection that emerged in tandem with systems of mass education in the nineteenth century across Europe and the USA, in order to ensure that those children who show the greatest potential get the best possible education so that 'talent does not go to waste.' As shown in stakeholder views in section *5.2.1*, and especially, in relation to the structure of setting and streaming, the idea that educational provision should suit 'natural talent' is still a strong meritocratic theme. Not only does *Liza* imply that she only started blossoming when provision was matched to her ability in top sets where she is 'taught with kids who are clever like me', teacher *Ellie* argues that because pupils 'access the curriculum at different levels, mixed ability teaching disadvantages talented pupils because it holds them back'. The same conviction can be seen in the comments of stakeholders like Elizabeth, Samir, Tabitha, Amina and Nyabbo; (iii) Achievement as the basis for social inequality. The third element of meritocracy that could explain its popularity is linked to the functionalist idea that ascription needs to be replaced by achievement: For society to perform most efficiently, differences in achievement should lead to different rewards. Davis and Moore (1945), early representatives of this tradition, formulate this principle as follows: 'Social inequality is an unconsciously evolved device by which societies ensure that the most important positions are conscientiously filled by the most qualified persons' (p. 243). Regarding 'achievement' as a basis for affinity to meritocracy, stakeholders like *Donald* wonder why 'people who couldn't be bothered' should 'complain when those who chose to work hard get good things'. Put it differently, meritocracy's appeal flows from

its vision of power and privilege being allocated by individual merit, and not by social origins (e.g. *Kuzo, Kantu*). This is a reassuring thought for those with talent, and perhaps a comforting one for those without – at least they were given a fair chance (Appiah 2018).

In addition to the 'belief in a just world' tradition, social scientists have situated the success of the meritocratic narrative in powerful societal groups' interest in maintaining their advantages through self-justification (Kluegel and Smith 1986; Mijs 2016) – a kind of false-consciousness conveniently hatched to 'keep the lower classes from uprising', as Karl Marx would put it. In other words, meritocracy's appeal may be linked to the cultural process of boundary making, whereby people in positions of advantage develop beliefs that legitimise closure between them and those below (Lamont et al. 2014). The American Dream is a good example of such a cultural narrative, that elites draw from and reproduce in order to justify their privileges (Hochschild 1996; Kelly and Enns 2010). The ideology of the 'American Dream' tells Americans that their society is a meritocratic one where anyone has an equal chance to rise from log cabin to White House. All that is needed is effort, and the individual material wealth and the high status that goes with it will fall in place. 95 per cent of Americans firmly believe in meritocracy (Toynbee 2019). The findings of this research mirrors Mijs' (2019), which indicates that the majority of the UK population justify social inequality via the meritocratic narrative. The 'deficit' comments adopted, especially, by the more privileged respondents seemed to justify the fortunes of the successful, casting their privilege as deserved:

- **The naturally fitter**: even in nature it is the fittest that survive (*Patricia*). That is just the way nature works….The unfit die out, the fit survive (*Janette*)

- **The more talented**: human beings are not the same. Some are naturally more talented than others (*Tony*). I am doing well because I am taught with kids who are clever like me (*Liza*).

- **Harder working**: some people who couldn't be bothered want things to be equal (*Kuzo*). If you choose to be lazy then you should not complain when those who chose to work hard get good things (*Donald*).

- **Better culture/home life:** the working-class are not ambitious for their children and…..their home life lacks structure (*Stella*). The reason why making schools similar is not the answer is the chaotic homes…..our children hail from (*Joroz*).

Neoliberal policies, rolled out throughout the West since the 1980s, may have helped the meritocratic cause by reinforcing the notion that success and setbacks in the free-market are reflective of individuals' talents, efforts or lack thereof (Mijs et al. 2016). As is also evident in this research (e.g. *Donald* - If you choose to be 'lazy'; *Pamela* – nothing comes easy. I can't begin to tell you how much time and resources we have put in to get Corey to this level), research indeed suggests that the public in the West increasingly blame the poor for their misfortune and praise the successes of the 'meritocratic' rich (Weaver et al.1995; Hills 2005). In this sense, Sayer (2015) and Monbiot (2017) have situated the meritocratic narrative in a whole series of strategies that neoliberalism uses to conceal its power, enabling it to dangerously operate anonymously. Other than narratives like 'meritocracy' it employs 'words' that perform a similar function. The concept 'the market', for example, sounds like a natural system that might bear upon us equally, like gravity or atmospheric pressure. But it is fraught with power relations. What 'the market wants' actually tends to mean what corporations and their bosses want. 'Investment' is another word that Sayer argues camouflages neoliberalism. Whilst it is usually taken to mean the funding of productive and socially useful activities, it really mostly means the purchase of existing assets to milk them for rent, interest, dividends and capital gains.

Regarding the role of experiences, Mijs (2016) argues that the rise in inequality in the West may have itself helped to cultivate the pervasive commitment to meritocracy because of inequality's tendency to increase social distance between different social groups. As ably

articulated by Simon (that posh boys' club called private schooling….we all know who goes there and which positions in society they end up occupying), research suggests that income and wealth inequality creates greater spatial and social distance between the wealthy and the poor because of the different lives they live: children grow up in poor or wealthy neighbourhoods, attend different schools, find friends and romantic partners in their own circles, and come to work in increasingly polarized labour markets (Neckerman and Torche 2007; Owens 2016). As a result, people on either side of the income divide are unable to see the breadth of the gap that separates their lives from those of others. This generates the tendency in people to read the world from their own situated position and to extrapolate from their own experiences (Irwin 2018). As such, large inequality paradoxically insulates people from recognising the factors that might mitigate an individual's responsibility for their situation or actions. The result is that people in more unequal societies underestimate the extent of inequality and the role of structural advantages or barriers that help or hurt them, and are therefore more likely to believe in merit (Merolla et al. 2011; Newman et al. 2015). The fact that the UK is one of the most unequal countries in the developed world (Wilkinson and Pickett 2009; 2019) may explain the strong endorsement of educational structures on meritocratic grounds revealed by this research.

These then are the processes that may be responsible for the success of the meritocratic narrative, and the source of the paradox we face, where citizens of some of the world's most unequal societies think of their country as the paragon of fairness. Whatever the explanation for its popularity, egalitarian commentators like Michael Sandel (2018) argue that in the pervasiveness of meritocratic outlook lies the basis for its tyranny, which is largely predicated on the normative premise that people deserve their lot because they have wilfully created it. Monbiot (2017) adds that such tyranny is equally driven by a successful recasting of inequality as virtuous: a reward for utility and a generator of wealth, which trickles down to enrich everyone. Efforts to create a more equal society are therefore both counterproductive and

morally corrosive, as the market ensures that everyone gets what they deserve. Consequently, the rich persuade themselves that they acquired their wealth through merit, ignoring the advantages – such as education, inheritance and class – that may have helped to secure it. The poor, on the other hand, begin to blame themselves for their failures, even when they can do little to change their circumstances. This in turn informs the pervasive 'deficits' and 'aspirations' public and policy discourse which justifies inequality on the 'inadequacies' of the working-class, and diagnoses a policy intervention that aims to raise their 'aspirations' to work harder.

6.1.1 The discourse of 'deficits' and 'aspirations'

Logically tied the tyranny of merit is the public and policy-favoured discourse of 'deficits' and 'aspirations'. Sociology of 'deficits' refers to the projection of 'inadequacies' onto working-class young people and their families to explain their 'inability' to succeed in a meritocratic environment. Stakeholder comments portrayed unsuccessful individuals in the English school system as lacking in:

- Natural talent – *Carl, Tony, Ellie, Michael, Liza, Judith,* Elizabeth
- Handwork/effort/motivation – *Atalia, Donald, Kantu, Kuzo, Theresa, Vincent, Jimmy*
- Aspirational home background/culture/structure – *Selina, Joroz, Alice, Stella, Vincent*
- Survival 'fitness' – *Janette, Patricia, Carl, Michael*

Stakeholders were clear that those who achieve good educational outcomes deserve their win because they possess the qualities that make for educational success; and that the egalitarian structural levelling solution does not only constitute an injustice, but will not improve the educational lot of working-class young people because they are fundamentally irresponsible, lazy and unambitious. Selina, for example, while commenting of the structure of setting and streaming, claimed that 'some children don't even know why they go to school…..because no

one cares about education at home…..it would be a nightmare having such children in the same class as your child'. These stakeholder comments merge with popular meritocratic narrative that 'class position and poverty are lifestyle choices: that anyone who wants to be, and tries hard enough, can be middle-class' (Reay 2012, p.593).

Bauman (2005) traces the success of meritocracy's narrative of 'deficits' to the neoliberal society's positioning of individuals within economic frameworks of active, entrepreneurial citizenship. Through the discourses of the 'work ethic' and meritocracy, individuals are encouraged to believe that 'hard-work' combined with 'talent' will naturally lead to social and economic rewards. Those who do not advance in this manner are portrayed as 'failed consumers', responsible for their own failure to thrive. Thus, he suggests that by re-contextualising poverty as a primarily cultural problem – a poverty of aspiration – economic 'success' is constructed as a matter of individual choice. Egalitarian commentators argue that such narrative breeds the widespread contempt for those who are disfavoured by the ethic of – effortful competition (Appiah 2018; Toynbee 2019), a fulfilment of Young's (1958) prediction that faith in merit would harden into a new class divide:

> It is good sense to appoint individual people to jobs on their merit…It is the opposite when those who are judged to have merit of a particular kind harden into a new social class without room in it for others (p.54).

The ugly face of such contempt, argues Toynbee (2019) has in recent times been exemplified by among others, the sheer spite of Peter Lilley, Tory social security secretary, in 1992 singing to his party conference a Mikado pastiche of a 'little list' of people to be despised: 'young ladies who get pregnant just to jump the housing queue' and 'benefits offenders' making 'bogus claims'. Then there was the right-wing press and Benefits Street mockery that set the tone of public contempt for anyone in need. The consequence of such campaign is the Ipsos Mori (2013) finding that the public thought £24 in every £100 was fraudulently claimed against

government figures showing fraud at just 1.1 per cent of the benefits budget. Such too explains why stakeholder commitment to individualist accounts of educational failure is faultable due to being based on trendy neoliberal narratives, which though erroneous, mostly obscure the real determinants of the class-gap.

In policy circles, 'low expectations' is frequently cited as one of the most significant barriers to working-class educational achievement (DCSF 2009; Sodha and Margo 2010). Similar to stakeholder view identified by this research (e.g. *Selina, Joroz, Alice, Jimm*y), political and media elites seem wedded to a cultural understanding of class and view the working-class as made up of individuals who need to take more responsibility for their lives. The DCSF (2009) document entitled *The Extra Mile: How Schools Succeed in Raising Aspirations in Deprived Communities* articulates this view as follows:

> Children living in deprived communities face a cultural barrier which is in many ways a bigger barrier than material poverty. It is the cultural barrier of low aspirations and scepticism about education, the feeling that education is by and for other people, and likely to let one down (p. 2).

Welshman (2007) argues this narrative informs the UK social policy tendency to justify and implement harsh prescriptive solutions based on what is 'lacking' in the people of 'poor neighbourhood'. Social policy oriented toward the 'righting' of the 'bad culture' of the working-class has been the objective of successive UK governments and institutions for many decades. Naturally, the Conservative Party, given its neoliberal vision, would be expected to drive the 'deficit' discourse, and this has been the case at least since the 1970s when Conservative governments have used the rhetoric of the 'deficit' model of working-class people to explain inequality. For example, Thatcher's Conservative government during the 1980s introduced the term 'underclass'. More recently, Prime Minister David Cameron applied the discourse of 'Broken Britain' to explain the same. Such vision is natural for the Conservative Party because, coming from the political Right, it views individual rights and

responsibilities, rather than state intervention, as paramount in creating a fair society. It is the responsibility of the individual to take hold of the opportunities that are available and so prosper (Smith 2012). That the state should play a diminished role in ensuring equality and social justice was perhaps best expressed by Margaret Thatcher (1975) in her speech to the Institute of Socio-economic Studies in New York:

> opportunity means nothing unless it includes the right to be unequal and the freedom to be different. One of the reasons that we value individuals is not because they're all the same, but because they're all different. I believe you have a saying in the Middle West: 'Don't cut down the tall poppies. Let them rather grow tall.' I would say, let our children grow tall and some taller than others if they have the ability in them to do so.

Here, Thatcher, an ardent representative of neoliberalism, captures the ideology's standard defence of meritocracy: Justice is the primary responsibility of the individual, a choice that the state can do nothing about. It is correcting for it that is unjust, not only against those who choose to be different through 'hard-work', but also against those who have the 'ability' to grow tall.

It was, however, the Left-leaning Labour Party's entry into the meritocracy/deficit explanatory model that was unexpected. Prime Minister Tony Blair and his New Labour Government introduced the phrase 'welfare sub-culture' through the social exclusion discourse during their first term in government in 1997. This remained a central tenet of New Labour's education policy throughout its time in office. New Labour's last Prime Minister of the period, Gordon Brown, famously declared:

> The poverty of aspiration is as damaging as the poverty of opportunity and it is time to replace a culture of low expectations for too many with a culture of high standards for all (2007)

This is not the traditional pitch of socialist parties; and obviously not for a Labour Party that, at the beginning of governing, had promised a move away from the 'New Right' approach that

treated social issues ‘as evils to be undone’ (Blair 1998, p.1). Of the Left is ‘usually’ a structural account which explains inequality in terms of the inferior educational experiences of the poor that hold them back and prevent them from competing with privileged groups (Smith 2012). It is an account that charges the state with performing the paramount role of ensuring that people’s life experiences are fair. In the understanding of New Labour’s *Third Way*, the state takes the form of an ‘enabling’ government which, passionate in its commitment to social justice, harnesses the power of the markets to serve the public interest (Dale 2000). That the New Labour government, at its sunset, seemed deeply engrossed in the opposing neoliberal ‘deficit’ narrative of working-class failure, explains the pervasiveness of the meritocratic vision across the political divide, which this research has discovered in the strength of stakeholder opinion in this direction.

6.2 THE STRUCTURAL ACCOUNT – MYTH OF MERITOCRACY

Whilst ‘public’ understanding and social policy in England is today largely driven by the meritocratic account of social justice, Young’s vision of meritocracy was decidedly dystopian. He believed that a system of class filtered by meritocracy would still be a system of class: it would involve a hierarchy of social respect, granting dignity to those at the top, but denying respect to those who did not inherit the talents and the capacity for effort which, combined with proper education, would give them access to the most highly remunerated occupations (Young 1958). Indeed, stakeholder comments in chapter five reveal the less than complimentary way in which those at the bottom are held today:

- Lazy, unambitious, irresponsible, ‘unfit’, deserve-to-die-out, not-clever, of-chaotic-home-lives, without-talent, don’t value education.

It is because of this kind of outcome that Young was concerned that the class hierarchies he had fought would resist the reforms he had helped to implement[12], and explained the dystopian scenario the rise of meritocracy would create in his 1958 satire. He imagined a country in which 'the eminent know that success is a just reward for their own capacity, their own efforts', and the lower classes believe that they have failed every fair chance they were given. Young wrote, as he imagined the realisation of the meritocracy some years in the future:

> Now that people are classified by ability the gap between the classes has inevitably become wider. Today the eminent know that success is just reward for own capacity, for their own efforts and for their own undeniable achievement. They deserve to belong to a superior class. Thus, some members of the meritocracy, have become so impressed with their own importance as to lose sympathy with the people whom they govern (1958, p.96)

Young concluded his dystopian scenario by predicting that in the year 2034, the less educated classes would rise up in a populous revolt against the meritocratic elites. Stakeholder commitment to meritocratic explanations in this research may suggest that this prediction came true a decade and half ahead of schedule. Indeed, egalitarian commentators like Michael Sandel (2018, 2020) cite the election of Donald Trump, and the rise of far-right populism, as evidence of fulfilment of Young's prediction. Young's *The Rise of Meritocracy* was intended to serve as the last sign of resistance to the new order, asking for a society that 'both possessed and acted upon plural values', including kindliness, courage and sensitivity, so each had a chance to develop their own special capacities for leading a rich life. Upholding the equation 'IQ + effort = merit', on the contrary, only translated into sponsoring a larger inequality (Appiah 2018). Fortunately or unfortunately, Young, who died in 2002, lived to see his prophecy come true and lamented how education had 'put its seal of approval on a minority, and its seal of

[12] Young drafted the Labour Party manifesto on which the party won the 1945 election and delivered on: raising the school-leaving age to 15, adult education, public housing, free public secondary school education, creating a national health service, and providing social security for all.

disapproval on the many who fail to shine from the time they are relegated to the bottom streams at the age of seven or before'. He decried how what should have been a mechanism of mobility had become fortresses of privilege; and saw an emerging cohort of mercantile meritocrats who can be insufferably smug (e.g. *Patricia* = it is the fittest that survive*; Janette* = the unfit die out*; Donald* = if you choose to be lazy; *Kuzo* = people who couldn't be bothered; *Selina* = some children don't even know why they go to school; *Denise* = I refuse to believe that all families are responsible) much more so than the people who knew they had achieved advancement not on their own merit but because they were, as somebody's son or daughter, the beneficiaries of nepotism. The carapace of 'merit', Young argued, had only inoculated the winners from shame and reproach (Appiah 2018).

6.2.1 The real determinants of meritocratic selection

Following Young's cue, egalitarian educationists reject the promise of meritocracy as a narrative that is not only unfulfillable, but also unjust (Mijs 2016; Sandel 2020). This is because meritocratic narrative ignores, as Young (1958) had argued, non-meritocratic elements which themselves are the real determinants of meritocratic selection and inequality. They highlight how meritocratic selection is significantly compromised by morally arbitrary factors (e.g. natural distribution of talent, socio-economic structure of society, and the organisation of schooling) that distort the ideal meritocratic process and which are not themselves merited by those who benefit from meritocratic practice. Such egalitarian claims were underscored by respondents like Graham, Wiktoria, Fidel, Sabiya, Simon, Phillip and Alice, whose comments reveal the 'sugar-coating' of educational injustice by the meritocratic narrative. Wiktoria, for example, highlighted the role of the structure of schooling and of society in determining her daughters' access to superior education: 'of course it is all down to money. It has cost us a lot to get the girls to a grammar school'. Research into the role of private-tuition in aiding educational success vindicates Wiktoria's views that, at least in England, meritocracy is a fat myth – pupils

from disadvantaged backgrounds are twice as less likely to receive the achievement-propelling private-tuition than their more affluent counterparts (Kirby 2016). That such structural lottery favours the privileged was confirmed by other respondents:

- **Sabiya** – In the race for a good league-table ranking, the best resources are deployed to ensure that those who can pass will pass….those in bottom-sets are not in this category (*organisation of schooling).*
- **Simon** – We all know who goes there (to private schools) and which positions in society they end up occupying (*socio-economic capital/organisation of schooling*).
- **Rudolf** – What we have in this country is comprehensive education in nothing but name (*organisation of school).*
- **Fidel** – The connection between privilege and successful schools is so obvious, yet no one seems to see it (*socio-economic capital/organisation of schooling).*
- **Phillip** – We didn't even know such a thing (grammar schools) existed….. the reason they moved.….was to get in (*socio-economic capital).*
- **Alice** – It is pressure, pressure at home. Not like at my mate Lucia's… they stress over my homework…check with my teachers….they got me a tutor….they want me to go to uni and have a career…. (*socio-economic capital*).
- **Steve** – Good schools…….are not for commoners like us (*organisation of schooling/socio-economic capital).*
- **Toti** – I try my hardest but this school is a mess……I don't think I will do well (*socio-economic capital/organisation of schooling).*

Observing that the whole case for the meritocratic ethic rests on the idea that we don't deserve to be rewarded based on factors beyond our control, Michael Sandel (2020) wonders why those who happen to be lucky in the genetic/birth lotteries deserve the outsize rewards that market societies lavish on the successful. He argues that since having or lacking certain talents or socio-economic privileges is really not our own doing, it is hard to see why those who succeed

deserve greater rewards than those who may be equally hard-working but are less endowed with the gifts that a market society happens to prize.

An examination of the meritocratic ethic via the socio-economic determination of meritocracy seems to absolve the egalitarian complaint. Consider, for the example, the known fact, demonstrated by stakeholder like Steve, Wiktoria, Phillip, Kuzo and Alice, that people will inevitably want to share both money and status with those they love, seeking to get their children financial and social rewards by any means available. Perhaps the best illustration of this fact is given by the renowned economist Yanis Varoufakis (2017).

> All babies are born naked, but soon after some are dressed in expensive clothes bought at the best boutiques while the majority wear rags. Once they've grown a little older, some get annoyed every time relatives and godparents bring them yet more clothes, since they would prefer other gifts, such as the latest iPhone, while others dream of the day when they might be able to head to school without holes in their shoes (p.7)

One only needs to combine this kin-affinity with that of wide-ranging inequalities of income and wealth in England (Wilkinson and Pickett 2009, 2019; Joyce and Xu 2019), and they have the fact of parental social and economic capitals, and not merit, determining one's social rewards (Bourdieu 1984; Reay 2012). This explains the overwhelming link between parental occupation, income, and qualifications, and English children's educational success reflected in stakeholder comments. In a marketised environment where the wealthy have better purchasing power, therefore, both economic and social capital determine meritocratic rewards and mitigate against educational equity. Michael Sandel (2020) explains that this really is the turn meritocracy has taken in market societies. It has hardened into a 'hereditary aristocracy' or an unjust tyranny because of the extensive levels of inequality delivered by globalisation in recent decades. Sandel argues that meritocracy's tyranny is incensed by the fact that the age of globalisation has bestowed its rewards unevenly. For example, most of the income gains since the 1970s, in Britain and the US, have gone to those at the top while the bottom half have

received very little. In terms of how this has affected educational equality, Sandel highlights evidence showing that two-thirds of students at the elite universities of Harvard and Stanford come from the top-fifth of the US income scale. And, how, despite generous financial aid policies, fewer than 4 per cent of Ivy League students come from the bottom-fifth. Such evidence has led Yale's Daniel Markovits (2019) to charge that 'meritocracy has become precisely what it was invented to combat: a mechanism for the dynastic transmission of wealth and privilege across generations' (p.45).

Because research shows that meritocratic rewards are not meritocratically earned, egalitarian educationists are concerned that the pervasiveness of meritocratic policies in education pose a barrier to equality of opportunity. The random distribution of the real determinants of meritocracy means any definition of merit must favour some groups in society whilst putting others at a disadvantage (Mijs 2016). This not only renders the powerful rhetoric of individual pathologies unfair, but may also explain why successive educational policies anchored on meritocracy (e.g. the tripartite system and marketisation policies) have all either failed to mitigate educational inequality or have exacerbated it, and why the policy wheel is turned towards stigmatising individuals rather than addressing structures that diminish their agency. Such realisation perhaps gives credence to the view held by egalitarians like Reay (2017) that a neoliberal socially just educational system is a contradiction in terms. Occasionally tinkering with it can only produce the same unjust results. Because the issue is with neoliberalism itself, Reay doubts whether the attitudes that portray the working-class as deficient are amenable to change under a neoliberal policy regime.

Below is an analysis of popular meritocratic themes. They were the main bases stakeholder used in chapter five in their dismissal of the egalitarian proposal. Their pervasiveness in this research makes their individual inclusion in evaluating meritocratic practice essential. In

terming meritocratic promise an unfulfillable myth, egalitarian educationists dismiss its key elements (like hard-work, natural talent and choice) as themselves products of contingencies which are not meritocratically earned (Mijs 2016; Sandel 2020). As such, meritocratic practice, which justifies inequality on the basis of these non-meritocratic contingencies, is deemed dishonest and unjust.

6.2.1.1 Hard work/effort/ambition

As reported in chapter five, the most notable pillar of the meritocratic narrative discovered by this research was hard-work. A large majority of the respondents expressed an unwavering allegiance to the neoliberal conviction that 'victors' of the meritocratic race are deserving of their win because they work hard; and that 'losers' deserve the consequences of their failure too because they are 'lazy' or are lacking in ambition or effort. Such conviction was acutely underscored by Jimmy:

> What do you expect? Do nothing and be successful? I hear a lot of noise about inequality these days. Well, if you want things to be equal, go out and work. Otherwise, stop whining and living off other people's taxes.

According to Toynbee (2019) such finding is consistent with the 'neoliberal triumph over hearts and minds' in the public arena, characterised by even those on food banks blaming themselves for not having tried harder at school. Young's (1958) formula for merit too had highlighted the centrality of this element in the meritocratic narrative. Denoted by 'effort' in the formula 'IQ + effort = merit', 'hard-work' is a key function of achievement/social rewards, for which 'merit' provides a 'fair' basis for allocation. In fact, some social scientists consider 'hard-work' the most meritocratic part of Young's equation, for the simple fact that IQ itself is visibly conditioned by the non-meritocratic factor of who your parents happen to be (Mijs 2016).

The centrality of ‘hard-work’ to the meritocratic narrative has been linked to the dampening of citizens’ concerns about inequality (Mijs 2019….*fig. 6.1*). Research shows that people who believe inequality reflects the legitimate accomplishments of ‘hard-work’ are much less concerned about inequality than citizens who see inequality as driven by unfair structural forces beyond their control such as a person’s family wealth and connections (McCall 2013; Bucca 2016). This echoes Marx’s claim that the ideological superstructure would follow society’s material base. The USA is believed to the embodiment of this phenomenon: while it is one of the most unequal and least socially mobile society in the West (Wilkinson and Pickett 2009; Alesina et al 2018), its citizens are also the most resistant to redistribution of income and wealth, usually on the basis of moral desert by those who work hard (Brooks and Manza 2013; Almas et al 2019).

In policy terms, feminist research (Shain 2013) has identified the centrality of the discourse of hard-work in the justification of the individualisation of the curriculum as part of the larger defence of a market-driven education system. It is tied to girls’ overarching success, which contrasted with the emphasis on the ‘underachieving boy’ in recent years, has led to a binary positioning of girls as the ‘ideal’ neoliberal subjects who through their propensity for hard-work is the success of the English education system. Angela MacRobbie (2009) argues that this neoliberal positioning has placed on girls a requirement to have a ‘life plan’, a kind of ‘modality of constraint’ that compels them to be the kind of subject who can make the right choices, leading to new lines and demarcations being drawn between ‘those subjects who are judged responsive to the regime of personal responsibility, and those who fail miserably’ (p.19).

Despite its centrality in the public and policy understanding of inequality, egalitarian advocacy considers ‘hard-work’ a red herring in any justification of social inequality. Though it displays

the illusion of individual agency, they argue that the beneficiaries of social rewards do not deserve them, either because they have actually 'not worked hard' to secure those rewards or (if they have 'worked hard') their capacity for 'hard-work' is a product of natural and socio-economic contingencies for which they cannot claim credit. Other egalitarians put it even more crudely, 'hard-work' alone would get you nowhere. You would merit nothing with it as you would be competitively eliminated. Arguing the case for the first position, Guy Standing (2019) invites those branding his proposed Universal Basic Income (UBI) a lazy scrounger's enterprise to consider 'the grotesque levels of wealth inequality' in the UK, which he claims currently translates to 60 per cent of UK wealth being inherited wealth. For Standing, this fact, and the statistical evidence showing that wealth inequality is far greater than income inequality in the UK (Joyce and Xu 2019), means that those actually lacking in 'hard-work' are the privileged few who through the sheer lottery of birth receive 'a lot of something for nothing' in heritance. Yet, despite this, Monbiot (2017) argues that inheritors continue to style themselves as entrepreneurs. They claim to have earned their unearned income, and the public are mostly unable to see past this lie (e.g. *Jimmy* = if you want things to be equal, go out and work*;* *Donald* = You see, nothing comes for free. Money does not grow on trees; *Kuzo* = If you don't work hard, you don't deserve the fruits of hard-work). Andrew Sayer (2015) develops this view by explaining how contrary to normative opinion rent and interest are unearned income that accrue without any effort. When you pay an inflated price for a train ticket, for example, only part of the fare compensates the operators for the money they spend on fuel, wages, rolling stock and other outlays. The rest reflects the fact that they have you over a barrel. Likewise, interest payments, overwhelmingly, are a transfer of money from the poor to the rich without any further effort invested by the rich in earning the money. Earned income, if any in the first place, is supplanted by unearned income.

Standing, Monbiot and Sayer's position above infers the second egalitarian position. That, if those 'deserving' of social rewards have actually 'worked hard' then their capacity for 'effort' is not really their doing, but that of natural and social contingencies for which they cannot claim credit. On this point, Michael Sandel (2010) underlies the difference the inculcation of family values and financial resource deployment can make to the capacity for hard-work. He cites a study, which considered the economic background of students in the USA's 146 topmost selective colleges and universities, and found that only 3 per cent come from the bottom quarter of the income scale, compared to about 75 per cent hailing from the richest 25 per cent. Sandel goes on to argue that even effort depends a lot on fortunate family circumstances for which no one can claim credit. He adds that the well-documented socio-economic success of children who are first in birth order, which psychologists now attribute to capacity for effort, conscientious striving or work-ethic is explained more by how society handles these children than their effort being their own doing. So, neither talent nor effort, the two things that would determine rewards in the world of meritocracy, are themselves earned. If the case for the meritocratic conception is that effort or 'hard-work' should be rewarded, the arbitrariness of the factors shaping 'effort' makes meritocratic practice only a yielder of injustice.

The final egalitarian position argues that contrary to popular belief, 'hard-work' per se gets you nowhere. You would merit nothing with it. Explaining this position, Reay (2012) argues that the empty rhetoric of meritocracy has succeeded in diverting attention from the powerful structures that ensure that the middle-class are the only winners, and has created the false-consciousness that individuals only have themselves to blame for their inability to work hard. The pervasive nature of this 'myth', which Reay herself derides, is perfectly captured by Hashi Mohamed (2017):

> The pervasive narrative of 'if you work hard you will get on' is a complete myth. It's not true and we need to stop saying it. This is because working hard, and doing the right thing barely gets you to the starting line….so much more is required (p.2)

Mohamed warns that we must not fall prey to the short-term distraction caused by token success stories that legitimise the 'hard-work' narrative either. All they do is help perpetuate the simple notion that what is required is 'hard-work' and that all else afterwards falls neatly into place. Giving credibility to token success stories, he argues, skews the fact that family and class background are the primary arbiters of educational success (as pointed out by e.g.Toti, Steve, Wiktoria, Fidel, etc)

> The story of the Somali boy who got a place at Eton, or the girl from the East End who is now going to MIT. These stories may seem inspiring at first blush, but they skew the complex picture that exists in deprived communities….The reality is that there are many like them trying hard to do better, but may be lacking the environment to fully realise their potential (p.3).

6.2.1.2 Natural talent

As shown in chapter five, natural talent was a popular theme advanced by stakeholders in defence of defence of hierarchical school structures. The overall stakeholder reasoning was that a structural equalising of educational structures would be unjust because it holds back those with natural ability, denting their potential and harming societal progress in the process (*Elliott, Tabitha, Tony, Ellie, Liza, Martin*). The cause for the latter was neatly summarised by *Martin*:

- Societal progress depends on us developing our best talents, even as we try to give everyone the best education. Don't throw the baby out with the bathwater!

The findings of this research are, therefore, in tandem with Young's (1958) formula for merit, which had highlighted the centrality of 'natural ability' in the meritocratic narrative. Denoted by 'IQ' in the formula 'IQ + effort = merit', 'natural ability' is a key function of achievement/social rewards, for which 'merit' provides a 'fair' basis for allocation. Stakeholder preference for a stratified school system via this theme mirrors research evidence showing that

the public and policy-makers are wedded to the conviction that education systems should be organised in such a way that children who show the greatest potential get the best possible education so that 'talent does not go to waste' (Mijs 2016). Mijs explains that this is what informed the process of testing and selection that emerged in tandem with systems of mass education in the nineteenth century across Europe and the USA. In the English policy environment, for example, the post-Second World War tripartite system legitimised educational inequality through the ideology that ability is inborn, and that it can be measured early on in life through the 11-plus (Webb et al. 2015). According to Ruitenberg and Vokey (2010), the conviction that education should nurture 'natural talent' has origins in Plato's conception of *justice as harmony* (based on the principle of merit). This approach argues that people have different talents and that these different talents, when put together, will strengthen the community as well as society more widely. Education should seek to support these different talents and by doing so will help individuals reach their (different) potentials, and so benefit society (*Martin, Sandra*). Any alternative to a hierarchical arrangement, therefore, would constitute an oppressive artificial order that works against human nature, and allows a lot of talent to go to waste. This is one of the reasons why, as this research has found (e.g. *Carl, Michael, Janette, Tony* and *Patricia*) and as researchers like Reay (2017) have charged, egalitarian efforts such as comprehensivisation of education and other forms of social mixing are continuously undermined because they are deemed an injustice against those who are biologically superior. Causing a furore, the current British Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, may have given an insight into current (Conservative Party) policy thinking on this theme when he gave The Margaret Thatcher Lecture in 2013. Arguing that economic equality will never be possible because some people are simply too stupid to catch up with the rest of society, Johnson (2013) explained:

> Whatever you may think of the value of IQ tests it is surely relevant to a conversation about equality that as many as 16% of our species have an IQ below 85.

Comparing society to a box of cornflakes, he praised inequality for creating the conditions under which the brightest triumph: ‘the harder you shake the pack, the easier it will be for some cornflakes to get to the top’. Inequality ‘is essential for the spirit of envy and keeping up with the Joneses that is, like greed, a valuable spur to economic activity’.

The egalitarian rebuttal to the ‘natural ability’ argument can be condensed into two main positions: i) ‘natural talent’ is an illusion, so, cannot determine educational success; and ii) ‘natural ability’ is a morally arbitrary genetic lottery which individuals who happen to be lucky should not be allowed to use to claim better distributive shares for their benefit alone. Arguing the former case, Wilkinson and Pickett (2009, 2019), explain that what actually affects children’s life chances, indeed the greatest contributor to their educational success, is their environment – socio-economic circumstances of the family and the kind of schools they are able to access. Contrary to the popular view that social hierarchy reflects genetic differences in ability, Wilkinson and Pickett argue that all we have in natural terms are small genetic variations in people’s aptitudes which powerful environmental forces magnify to produce social hierarchy. Brain scans now show that input from the environment changes the physical structure of our brains, thereby explaining the massive differences in aptitude and exposing the illusion of genetic origin. So, it is not the innate differences in, for example, IQ that determine where you end up in the hierarchy, but it is where you are in the hierarchy which influences the kind of abilities that you develop, that in turn explains your place in the hierarchy. In other words, any relationship between hierarchy and ability is more a reflection of where you come from, in terms of family background, which builds your brain in a certain way and gives you a particular kind of life, than of natural capacities.

Arguing the latter position, John Rawls (1971) dismisses the distribution of societal benefits on the basis of natural endowments because it is a factor that is arbitrary from a moral point of

view. Via his *Difference Principle*, Rawls argues that the distribution of incoming wealth and opportunities should not be based on factors for which people can claim no credit. As such, meritocracy (and all the other rival theories of justice – e.g. feudal aristocracy and libertarianism) must be rejected because of its inability to address the moral arbitrariness of the factors that determine access to societal rewards. Rawls' solution to dealing with the moral arbitrariness of natural endowments is that: people may benefit from their good fortune, from their luck in the genetic lottery, but only on terms that work to the benefit of everyone, especially those who have not been lucky. As competently expounded by Sandel (2010), Rawls is saying that Michael Jordan or Bill Gates, for example, can make their millions/billions but only under a system that taxes away the returns of the basketball or business prowess that nature has endowed them with. They cannot think that they somehow morally deserve those millions/billions. Rawls (1971) writes of the luck in the genetic lottery:

> Those who have been favoured by nature, whoever they are, may gain from their good fortune but only on terms that improve the situation of those who have lost out (p.101).

For Rawls, if you are bothered by basing distributive shares on factors arbitrary from a moral point of view, you don't just reject feudal aristocracy for a free market. On the contrary, you set up a system where everyone, especially those at the bottom, benefit from the exercise of the talents held by those who happen to be lucky in the genetic lottery.

It was clear that this nuanced understanding of 'natural talent' is not the standpoint from which stakeholders perceive social inequality. As such, their endorsement of hierarchical educational structures via this theme may not be equated to approval of educational inequality.

6.2.1.3 Social mobility

Social mobility is another key theme, which formed the basis for stakeholder endorsement of current hierarchical school structures. Stakeholder reasoning here was two-fold. Not only do

superior educational structures epitomise good practice that other institutions can benefit from (*Sandra, Tom, Vincent*), core to their practice is also a philanthropic outlook that is focused on supporting children from working-class backgrounds to rise (*Kieran, Judith, Mark-Anthony*). In other words, steep educational structures enable children from poor backgrounds to be upwardly mobile, either through inspiring quality education, or through directly supporting them to access superior education. That superior educational structures enable greater social mobility was the main argument behind the controversial Theresa May Government intention to expand selection (May 2016). The government was guided by evidence suggesting that grammar schools are crucial to eliminating the class attainment gap because they admit a socially diverse range of pupils, 45 per cent of whom come from households below the median-income (Mansfied 2019). On the same note, Michael Sandel (2018) observes that social mobility is the main strategy mainstream parties in Europe and America have employed in response to the problem of rising inequality. It is most evident in the rhetoric of opportunity, often summed up in the slogan 'those who work hard should be able to rise as far as their talents will take them'. Such, argues Sandel, has become almost like a trope of political rhetoric across the political spectrum. Politicians, centre-Left and centre-Right, have reiterated this slogan to the point of incantation. Barack Obama, he observes, was fond of a variation of this slogan drawn from a pop song: 'you can make it if you try'.

However, the egalitarian educationist dismisses social mobility on two major grounds. First, the discourse of social mobility frustrates the vision of a socially just education system which, according to Tawney (1964) should be much bolder and brighter than a focus on 'merely converting into doctors, barristers and professors a certain number of people who would otherwise have been manual workers' (p.77). The last Labour government gave the impression that it had yielded to this broader view of social justice. So, explained former Prime Minister Gordon Brown (2005):

> So instead of, as in the past, developing only some of the potential of some of the people, our mission for liberty for all and fairness to all summons us to develop all of the potential of all the people.

In practice, however, most structures that perpetuate educational inequality remained intact under the Labour government as the rhetoric of social mobility raged on. This is why Reay (2017) is concerned that most of the contemporary debate on making the educational system more equitable should focus on social mobility. For Reay, social mobility has less to do with educational equality, and more to do with an ideological whip with which to beat the working classes. She argues that the focus on social mobility neglects the fact that given the current high levels of inequality, social mobility is primarily about recycling inequality rather that tackling it. In other words, it is because it ignores the extent and influence of socio-economic capital in tilting educational advantage in favour of the wealthy that Sandel (2020) argues that the rhetoric of 'rising' today rings hollow. In today's economy it is not easy to rise because explosion of inequality in recent decades has enabled those on top to consolidate their advantages and pass them on to their children, a case of meritocracy hardening into what Sandel calls 'hereditary aristocracy'. Teacher *Simon* alluded to the inability of the social mobility strategy to tackle the class-gap when he mocked it as 'little tokens of favour' that does nothing more than sugar-coat the fact that superior education in England is 'for the few, not the many'. Similar sentiments were evident in the comments of the private school teacher *Lorenzo,* who felt that the social mobility response to the class achievement gap indicates 'lack of policy imagination' against a key institutional perpetuation of inequality.

Secondly, egalitarians see in the social mobility discourse a middle-class cultural chauvinistic ploy, which linked to the 'deficit' narrative explored earlier, portrays working-class culture as a lifestyle that individuals must escape as a pre-condition to improving their lot in life. Predicting this turn of events, Young (1958) had clarified that education should matter, not just

as a means of mobility, but as a way to make people more forceful as citizens, whatever their station – less easily bulldozed by commercial developers or the government planners of Whitehall. R.H. Tawney (1964) too had defended universal education on the same basis. He argued that it was just as important for those who remain working-class all their lives as it is for the upper and middle classes. For Tawney, a socially just educational system is one in which education is seen as an end in itself, a space that 'people seek out not in order that they may become something else but because they are what they are' (78). Sam Friedman (2016) explains that this really is the message we get from class-migrants. They report that the much-celebrated class-migration is usually a disaster for the socially mobile whose lives assume a struggle between two worlds. His research shows that working-class people experiencing social mobility symbolically retain their working-classness by not conforming to middle-class established norms, such as ways of dressing and speaking – even though this would make them 'fit' into the new fields they inhabit. This can create a terrible identity crisis, necessitated by both the nostalgia of 'past life' and the desire to save face in the new world of material opportunity.

Though a popular theme in the neoliberal justification of social inequality, in was evident that stakeholders endorsing hierarchical educational structures on the basis of social mobility can be said to lack awareness of the tokenistic nature of the social mobility rhetoric as highlighted by *Simon, Lorenzo,* Reay, Sandel, and Wilkinson and Pickett. Neither can we say that they understand, as argued by, Tawney, Young and Friedman, the cultural chauvinistic implication of the view that education should matter because it is a route to becoming middle-class. As such, endorsement of hierarchical structures on the basis of this theme may not be understood as denoting endorsement of educational inequality.

6.2.1.4 Innovation/creativity

As reported in chapter five, stakeholders also rejected the egalitarian proposal on the basis that levelling educational structures would stifle societal innovative capacity, which relies on a diverse and hierarchical institutional arrangement (*Nyabbo, Okelo, Miranda, Sandra*). The result, they argue, is not just a compromised educational quality but also a sub-standard socio-economic order (*Sandra, Martin, Penny*). The claims of this explanatory theme fit with the general neoliberal narrative that socialist policies commit a 'levelling violence' that negates humanity's hierarchical and creative nature (Wilkinson and Pickett 2019; Hayek 1944). According to this view, inequality is the natural result of the entrepreneurial system, where those go-getters who innovate can become very wealthy and those who are not creative can remain below in the hierarchy of status (Davis and Moore 1945; Johnson 2013). So, even though we might bemoan it, inequality is a good thing because it allows us to have an innovative spirit/society. It is ironical that the father of socialism, Karl Marx, had rejected capitalism on the same charge now targeted at socialism. Capitalism, Marx (1844), had argued, through its obsession with efficiency in production, alienates human beings from their species-being (creative nature) by consigning them to repetitive tasks over which they have no control. For Marx, humanity's creative nature springs from the totality of social relations which capitalism undermines.

The egalitarian response to this theme focuses more on the neoliberal argument that innovation is a product of steep hierarchy, a claim which, if true, should mean that unequal societies are more innovative. Explaining that the opposite is the case, Wilkinson and Pickett (2009) cite statistical evidence from the *World Intellectual Property Organisation* showing that there is a tendency for more patents to be granted per head of population in more equal societies than in less equal ones. Whether this is because talent goes undeveloped or wasted in more unequal societies, or whether hierarchy breeds conformity, is anyone's guess. But it does suggest that it is greater equality that correlates with creativity/innovation. Other data from Nobel Prize-

winning economists Stiglitz (2012) and Krugman (2013) show that inequality, far from spurring on economic growth, creates stagnation and instability.

Though a popular theme in the neoliberal justification of social inequality, turns out that endorsement of hierarchical structures on the basis of this theme is borne of the falsity that an innovative society is a product of unequal socio-economic order.

6.2.1.5 Human nature and Socialism

'Human nature' was a significant meritocratic theme advanced by stakeholders in dismissal of the egalitarian proposal. Stakeholders argued that hierarchical educational structures are fair not only because they reflect human nature, but also because they enable the 'fittest to survive' (*Patricia, Janette*). Rejecting flatter structures like mixed ability teaching, stakeholders had branded the egalitarian proposal a socialist utopia which, by refusing to acknowledge that inequality is hardwired into who we are, impedes the formation of a natural hierarchy of 'winners' and 'losers' (*Michael, Samir, Janette*). In fact, stakeholder reasoning on this theme merges with the libertarian advice to the egalitarian that he/she just needs to accept that 'life is not fair', and get over his or her whining (Sandel 2010). Such was the basis of Hayek's (1944) opposition to social democracy. He considered Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal and the gradual development of Britain's welfare state manifestations of a collectivism that occupied the same spectrum as Nazism and Communism. By crushing individualism, government planning, argued Hayek, would lead inexorably to totalitarian control.

The egalitarian rebuttal to this theme may take three forms. First, the advocacy may argue that human nature is not fixed. There is no such a thing as a distinct human nature. So, flatter structures do not represent an oppressive artificial tinkering with anything. Arguing this position, Wilkinson and Pickett (2019) draw on a broad range of international evidence to explain that human mind is hugely malleable. We have the evolved psychology or social

strategy that allows us to form different patterns of relationships. Not only are we able to deal with dominance issues or recognition of hierarchy (e.g. nervousness in relationship to higher status people, name-dropping or snobbishness), we also have strategies to do with friendship or equality from our egalitarian hunter/gatherer past. We recognise, for example, that reciprocity, sharing and cooperation are important. Both of these different social strategies or patterns of dealing with human relationships have evolutionary roots in us, which we use depending on the kind of social environment we find ourselves in. So, rather than saying that human beings are inevitably hierarchical, competitive, selfish, or that they have hearts of gold, are generous and mutually supportive, research shows that humans can be either of these things. Perhaps the most important trigger or lever to changing these patterns of behaviour is the kind of society we live in. In more unequal societies, we are more selfish, more hierarchical, less interested in other people, and less public-spirited. But, in more equal societies, we see the other side. Stakeholder *Graham* appeared attuned to this observation when he branded our inability to create an education system 'fit for the 21st Century' a reflection of 'our selfishness and lack of empathy for those we systematically fail'.

The second response clarifies that the reasoning behind the human nature theme misunderstands the egalitarian proposal. The demand that all manner of hierarchical provision be abolished as a pre-condition for establishing a socially just education system, is not championing curriculum/pedagogical uniformity. In other words, it is not advocating an arrangement that ignores the diversity and complexity of learner needs and talents that deserve unique attention. On the contrary, it is recommending a systemic needs-based approach to distributive justice that guarantees equality of opportunity via 'a truly comprehensive system where the differences between schools are minimised, while diversity within them is maximised' (Reay 2012, p.591). Reay explains that the vision of 'common school' must not be understood as denoting common lessons within institutions and common policies between

institutions. What the egalitarian is advocating is a unified system where all children attend the same type of school, rather than having one type of schooling for those who can afford it, another type for those who pass entrance exams, another type for those who live in affluent areas, and a separate one for the poor. In other words, a proper comprehensive education characterised by the co-existence of diverse ways of being. As explained by Appiah (2018), the goal championed by egalitarian is not 'to turn every mountain into a salt flat', but to create an environment in which class identities are respected and class in not made injurious (p.3).

The final egalitarian argument against the 'human nature' theme comes from the evidence that flatter educational structures are more academically beneficial. Against the specific charge that the egalitarian proposal constitutes a 'levelling violence' as the naturally gifted are held back by uniform structures (e.g. *Samir*, *Michael, Ellie*), evidence shows that social mixing makes all children thrive academically. Finland, for example, has comprehensive schools that do not set or stream pupils, yet, while in the UK only 24 per cent of students do better than expected given their background, in Finland over 40 per cent of children from poor homes exceed expectations (Shepherd 2010b). Moreover, Finland has far higher levels of literacy and numeracy than the UK. In four international surveys, all since 2000, Finnish comprehensive school students have scored above students in all the other participating countries in science and problem-solving skills, and come either first or second in reading and mathematics (Halinen and Jarvinen 2008).

So, it turns out that stakeholder endorsement of hierarchical school structures on the basis of this theme is based on trendy accounts of social justice which are devoid of a deeper understanding of human nature, of the proposal or of the real sources of educational inequality. As such, stakeholder support for hierarchical educational structures via this theme may not be understood as denoting endorsement of educational inequality.

6.2.1.6 Choice/diversity/identity

As shown in *section 5.2.1.5,* stakeholders rejected the egalitarian proposal arguing that since flat structures cannot deliver school diversity, school choice is by default eliminated. For these stakeholders, such outcome is unfathomable because social institutions should reflect the complex and diverse social life thereby enabling families to choose schools that best meet their children's specific needs (*Ita, Kasim, Asha, Jeremy, Christi*). As such, given the logical connection between choice and diversity, respondents see in school diversity the opportunity to align family identity with school identity. Key to choice too was the stakeholder emphasis on the freedom and justice of using 'hard-earned' family resources to give one's children the best education (*Donald, Carl, Kuzo*). Stakeholders were concerned that flatter structures would constitute an injustice because they would frustrate this noble end, as all schools would be the same and 'sub-standard' (*Sandra, Miranda, Michael*).

However, egalitarian educationists argue that diversity/hierarchy in school organisation, whilst securing 'choice', also breeds educational inequality. This is not only due to differences in material and informational resources on which 'choice' supervenes (Bourdieu 1993; Gewirtz 1995), but also because of the segregative tendencies of the so-called identity-delivering institutions (Reay 2017). The latter was perhaps best conveyed by *Steve,* who resigned to the view that good schools are 'not for commoners' like him, after failing to get his daughter into a successful local Catholic school. It is against this backdrop that egalitarian commentators like Reay (2012) argue that like 'social justice', choice and diversity have been well and truly 'neoliberalised'. The terms, whilst sounding progressive, positive and beneficial, have worked discursively to sanction and exacerbate inequalities. As Hanley (2010) puts it, 'if there is one thing that makes inequality tangible, it is the presence of choice for some and its absence for others' (p.41). The working classes predominantly constitute those people who are not able to exercise 'choice' because they get 'crowded out' of the best areas in which to send their

children to school or because they lack the knowledge or the resources required to make the best use of information about schools (*Rudolf, Phillip;* Butler and Hamnett 2010).

As such, even though diverse/hierarchical educational institutions may look like agents of identity and school choice, they are, on the contrary, sources of classist segregation. For example, *Christi* and his parents' case in chapter five at face value looks like family choice of grammar school, the specific kind of educational institution which suits their family identity or/and *Christi's* ability. But once he starts talking, it is clear that the economic, cultural and social capital that actually delivered the 'choice' of grammar school for the family is not available to lots of other families. Now contrast Christi's case with *Phillip's*. *Phillip* was decisively 'selected out' of accessing grammar schooling by lack of knowledge about grammar schools (We didn't even know such a thing existed), and inability to afford a house in the catchment area of a grammar school (We can't even afford the shed we live in). Such must be why *Rudolf* wondered how parents and pupils attending his school can be said to have choice when the next successful school was 'far away and over-subscribed'. These sentiments are consistent with evidence from the Education Policy Institute (Andrews and Hutchinson 2016) which shows that pupils who are eligible for FSM are massively under-represented in grammar schools. As such, defending educational structures on the basis of this meritocratic theme is tantamount to endorsing an injustice.

6.2.2 Psycho-social effects of meritocracy

For the egalitarian, the problem with meritocracy is not just that it is dishonest and unjust because the practice falls short of the ideal of eradicating the old encrustations of inherited hierarchies (Appiah 2018). In spite of the evidence invalidating its central hold on social policy in this regard, research shows that meritocratic justification of social inequality is also seriously psychologically corrosive and socially divisive (Sandel 2020, Wilkinson and Pickett 2009,

2019; Monbiot 2017; de Botton 2019). Consider below the traits respondents in this research attributed to 'winners' and 'losers'[13]:

- **'Winners'** – hard-working, ambitious, biologically-fitter, naturally-talented, clever, responsible, more-able, of structured-home-life, philanthropic, gifted.
- **'Losers'** – lazy, irresponsible, biologically-unfit, less-able, of-chaotic-home-life, unambitious, can't-be-bothered, envious, irresponsible, not-clever.

Egalitarian actors argue that the relentless narrative that the system rewards biological and socio-economic prowess (talent and hard-work) has a corrosive effect on the way we interpret our success or the lack of it. It encourages the 'winners' to consider their success their own doing, a measure of their virtue, and to look down upon those less fortunate than themselves as deserving of their status (Wilkinson and Pickett 2019; Sandel 2020). Put it another way, the notion that your fate is in your hands, that 'you can make it if you try' is a double-edged sword, inspiring in one way but invidious in another. It congratulates the 'winners' but adds insult to injury by denigrating the 'losers' even in their own eyes. For those who can't find work or make ends meet, it is hard to escape the demoralising thought that their failure is their own doing, that they simply lack the enterprising talent and/or the drive to succeed. Unlike in feudal aristocracy where social status was accepted as fixed by God and fate, meritocracy makes one question their self-worth, thereby exacerbating status anxiety and poisoning social relations (Sandel 2020). For this reason, Sandel (2018) argues that policy-makers who celebrate the meritocratic ideal and put it at the centre of their political project ignore the morally unattractive attitudes that the meritocratic ethic generates, among the 'winners' and also among the 'losers'. Among the 'winners' it generates hubris, the smug conviction that they deserve their fate (*Patricia, Janette, Kuzo, Donald*), in complete disregard of the luck and the good fortune that helped them on their way. Among the 'losers' it generates humiliation and a galling resentment

[13] Emerging labels for socio-economic 'success' or 'failure' in neoliberal society (de Botton 2019; Sandel 2020).

of the elites (*Tabitha, Simon, Toti*). Such galling resentment was evident in *Simon's* emotional dismissal of any suggestion that private schools could be a source of anything good in the community: 'Go tell that to the birds. Looks like you think our children are worth just little tokens of favour'.

The extent of the psychological cost of the meritocratic ethic is extensively explored by epidemiologists Wilkinson and Pickett (2009, 2019), as highlighted in chapter two. According to their research, problems that are related to social status within our societies get worse when we increase the social status differences. Meritocratic narrative is a key source of psychological stress because it makes class and status more important through the justification of inequality as signifying virtue or deficit of some kind. Meritocracy raises issues to do with status insecurity, status competition, and undermines feelings of self-worth because, if you live in a society where some people are regarded as hugely important, and others as almost worthless, we all become more worried about how we are seen and judged (e.g. *Tabitha* describing herself as stupid, and her friends as smart, due to the structure of setting and streaming which distinguishes pupils into 'ability' teaching groups). As such, people use different mechanisms to cope in a society where status anxiety is pronounced. This includes anything from reduced social contact, to drug and alcohol abuse and self-curation measures on the one hand, to narcissism and consumerism, on the other. As Paul Verhaeghe (2014) documents in his book *What About Me,* meritocracy is a core source of the psychological epidemic of neoliberalism: self-harm, eating disorders, depression, loneliness, performance anxiety and social phobia. George Monbiot (2017) observes that because of the psychological corrosiveness of neoliberalism, it is unsurprising that Britain, a country in which the neoliberal ideology has been rigorously applied, is today the loneliness capital of Europe.

Michael Sandel (2018, 2020) links the psychological corrosiveness of meritocracy to what he calls the explosive 'politics of humiliation'. It is the anxieties and frustrations produced by

'neoliberal technocracy', of which meritocratic is a core narrative, that is driving discontent with democratic norms, visible in the rise of far-right populism and the growing public support for autocratic figures who test the limits of such norms. A politics of humiliation, explains Sandel, differs from a politics of injustice in the sense that it is inward looking and hence psychologically more fated. It combines resentment of the 'winners' with a nagging self-doubt: perhaps the rich are rich because they are more deserving than the poor. Maybe the 'losers' are complicit in their misfortune after all. This feature of the politics of humiliation makes it more combustible than other political sentiments. It is a potent ingredient in the volatile brew of anger and resentment that fuels populist protest. So, more than a protest against immigrants, outsourcing and stagnant wages, the populist complaint is about the tyranny of merit, more about the fact that those who have flourished in the new economy look down with disdain (Sandel 2020).

On its part, the social divisiveness of the meritocratic narrative is connected to the fact that by banishing all sense of gift or grace or luck, meritocracy diminishes our capacity to see ourselves as sharing a common fate (Wilkinson and Picket 2019, Sandel 2020). This, together with the consequent anxieties produced by social ranking, leaves little room for the solidarity that can arise when we reflect on the contingency of our talents and fortunes. As the anxieties of status competition increase social stress, people withdraw from social life due to diminished self-esteem and confidence. Reduced social contact weakens community life, especially across income and wealth fault lines, and as discussed earlier, paradoxically becomes the main driver of the meritocratic narrative (Irwin 2018). As noted in chapter two, the psycho-social cost of inequality and its meritocratic justification has been identified in all manner of health and social problems, including, but not limited to: mental illness, obesity, children's educational performance, homicides, and imprisonment rates (Wilkinson and Pickett 2009; 2019).

One can only conclude that in a liberal democracy, the overwhelming level of meritocratic inclinations discovered in this research can only mean that meritocracy's legacy of psychological corrosiveness and social divisiveness will continue unabated.

6.3 IMPLICATIONS FOR REFORM AND WIDER SOCIO-ECONOMIC INEQUALITIES

Despite what might look like a strong egalitarian case given the 'injustice' and psycho-social corrosiveness/divisiveness of meritocracy, stakeholders overwhelmingly rejected the promise of educational equity delivered via a flatter structure of schooling arguing that a hierarchical structural order delivers justice to all children through the very meritocratic practice. This section discusses the implications for policy and wider socio-economic inequalities of this research finding.

6.3.1 Implications for educational reform

Egalitarian educational outlook is traditionally a Left-wing constituency, evident in England in major reform episodes like the inception of universal free secondary education in 1944, attempts at comprehensivisation in the 1960s, and 'stopgap' initiatives that today characterise English policy intervention against the class-gap (Reay 2017; Perry and Francis 2010). More recently, Corbyn's 2017/2019 Labour Party manifesto is thought to have given the closest policy expression of the egalitarian dream of a structurally equitable education system in England. Dubbed National Education Service (NES), the NHS-style plan mirrored the 1950/60s progressive efforts aimed at ending selection and delivering education free to all people of all ages at 'the point of use'. It was to involve not only the abolishment of private schools, but also of market-driven structures such as school choice and academies that evidence shows tilt educational success toward privilege (Heilbronn 2016; Reay 2017; Allen and Higham 2018; Gewirtz 1995; Ball 2003). The plan also entailed, abandoning university tuition fees, the restoration of maintenance grants, a full return of the early years compensatory

programme of Sure Start, an Arts Pupil Premium, and an end to the focus on standardised tests. The then Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn (2019) said of the policy proposal:

> we will invest in a National Education Service – free at the point of use – so everyone can learn at every stage of their lives….Imagine it: a National Education Service that's there for you as a child; as an adult; and in old age – so that no one is held back….I see education as an escalator running alongside you throughout life that you can get on and off whenever you want. That's what Labour's National Education Service will offer people – free education, as a right for all.

Echoing the long lost NHS-type intent at the inception of free universal education in 1944, the egalitarian educationist Melissa Benn (2018) explains that of Labour's recent NES pledge was a "genuinely free education over the course of a lifetime: 'cradle to grave' provision" (p. 2-3). She argues that the promise of a NES enshrines a set of guiding principles similar to that of the NHS, whose core values at inception were re-affirmed in 2011, including among them: a commitment to comprehensive provision, free at the point of use; special attention paid to disadvantaged groups; the placement of the individual at the heart of the service; a service that is publicly accountable; and an assurance of professional excellence. Only a national education service, adds Benn, can 'confirm education as a core entitlement, a guarantee from society to each one of its members to genuinely underwrite their intellectual and vocational development' (p.3).

However, what looked like a great opportunity for egalitarian educationists to finally merge their structural account of educational justice with governmental policy ended up in a trashing defeat for Corbyn's Labour. As we saw too with the defeat of Bernie Sanders' ('socialist') programme in America, looks like the overwhelming stakeholder allegiance to meritocracy discovered in his research has wider public appeal across market democracies. Indeed, a recent YouGov (2011) poll revealed that 85 per cent of people in the UK believe that in a fair society income should depend on how hard people work and how talented they are. Similarly, Almas

et al.'s (2019) experiment found that people were much more accepting of inequality when it resulted from merit instead of luck. The experiment revealed differences between countries in people's views of what is fair, with more Norwegians opting for redistribution even when gains were merit-based and more Americans accepting inequality even when outcomes were due to luck. As such, though some have argued that Brexit and negative neoliberal media campaign sealed Corbyn's fate, the findings of this research give credence to the view that Labour's defeat in the 2019 general election (and in the previous three) might have had more to do with the triumph of neoliberalism than with Brexit or capitalist smear. For Sandel (2020) and Joyce and Xu (2019) the picture gets more sinister and the pattern eerily familiar when we consider the fate of centre-left parties in recent times. Labour's recent defeats reflect a pattern of decline of centre-left parties across Europe and America mainly due to growing inequality and a greater sense of economic insecurity brought about technological change and globalisation that have threatened settled ways of life. The Democratic Party in the US lost to populist Trump against all odds in 2016; Germany's Social Democratic Party's share of the vote reached a historic low in the last federal election; Italy's Democratic Party's vote share in the last election dropped to less than 20 per cent; and, the Socialist Party in France's presidential nominee won only 6 per cent of the vote in the first round of the last election (Sandel 2018). Turns out that liberal and centre-left parties are the most conspicuous casualties of the populist backlash, which though directed at elites in general, is a protest against what Sandel calls 'neoliberal technocratic turn' of governing. Sandel (2020) argues that though the embrace of market thinking and market values was joined by mainstream parties of the Left and the Right, it was its embrace by centre-left parties that proved most consequential for the globalisation project itself and for the populist protest that followed. It may be argued that these parties are being punished for abandoning their traditional constituency for a market driven policy-making, making the

‘losers’ in the neoliberal globalisation project distrust all elite, especially their betraying traditional allies.

All this means that a ‘socialist’ proposal cannot sell in the current environment, not only due to a neoliberally-saturated public psyche, but also because of a sense of betrayal. Left-leaning politicians cannot get a democratic mandate to effect their vision of society partly because the public perceives them as having abandoned their station for a neoliberal outlook at a time of greatest need, a time of runaway inequality. The decline of social democratic parties is a huge blow to egalitarian vision of an integrated education system, because it is only them that could ever implement the ‘common school’. The Labour Party, which proposed and piloted comprehensive reform more than half a century ago, seemed the logical party for that task (Benn 2018). Yet, its decline as a social democratic party, even as neoliberalism tightens its grip on British society, can only mean that the proposal to flatten educational structures is relegated to an academic rant that stands little chance of ever finding policy expression. At least at face value, therefore, the implication for educational reform of the findings of this research is that it emboldens the governmental meritocratic conception of educational justice. With public opinion on its side, it is inconceivable that a mere socialist academic take on education can steer off a right-wing government from a neoliberal trajectory. Fundamentally speaking, socialist policy suggestions like this have their enemy in the tyrannous legacy of Friedrich Hayek’s neoliberalism. Hayek saw in social democracy, as exemplified by Roosevelt’s New Deal and the gradual development of Britain’s welfare state, the manifestations of a collectivism that occupied the same spectrum as Nazism and Communism. In *The Road to Serfdom,* Hayek (1944) argued that government planning (exemplified in the egalitarian proposal) would crush individualism, and lead inexorably to totalitarian control.

Melissa Benn (2018) tells of even a more dangerous but trendy mentality in mainstream neoliberal political circles that could consign bold but unfamiliar suggestions like this egalitarian proposal to dusty academic shelves forever. It is the fatal disregard for educational thinking which can be summarised in the adage: 'don't look at the big picture. Give us a small, smart, relatively safe idea that the neoliberal politician might snap up' (p.144). Benn is haunted by the briskly asked question that followed her presentation of a set of carefully prepared ideas, based on years of research, analysis, and policy discussion: 'that is all very well, but do you have any nudge-style proposals that might get a hearing in Downing Street?' (p.143) – kind of to say: 'we don't do serious thinking here at the Prime Minister's office. This is market-driven policy!' One may wonder whether this is the source of the egalitarian-derided stopgap interventions that Reay (2017) argues today epitomise English policy intervention against the class-gap.

The question, therefore, is: is there a platform that the egalitarian educationist could assume in the era of meritocratic tyranny in order that its structural account of educational inequality may find policy expression? What, for example, could be the moral weight of the argument that what we currently have in the public understanding of social inequality is a classic case of what Marx called 'false consciousness' – the public have been duped by powerful neoliberal narratives that conceal the fact that meritocracy is but a myth, its justification of social inequality constituting an injustice (Sayer 2015; Monbiot 2017; Sandel 2020)? Indeed, as revealed in the themes advanced by stakeholders in defence of meritocratic practice, there is a widespread commitment to individualist accounts of educational inequality. As such, the public may need to be educated on the real sources of educational inequality first before they can be on board. Or, it could be argued that their being on board is not even a pre-condition for the advocacy's success. Indeed, successful social justice advocacies like the American Civil Rights Movement, LGBTQ, and the feminist movement had neither the public, policy-makers, or the

law on their side. It is their moral character that helped secure their success. In other words, the history of social justice advocacy tells us that a well-organised and committed moral campaign may just be enough. Public or policy backing, though important, is unnecessary until after the advocacy has done its work of raising public awareness and challenging politicians to act on structural inequality. However, couldn't the conviction by a section of the elite that they have the 'truth' amount to a Hilary Clinton-'basket-of-deplorables' (BBC 2016) elitist undermining of the public's capacity to determine for itself a political path. After all, Michael Sandel (2020) has warned that the populist protest currently threating liberal democracy is partly fuelled by the 'neoliberal technocratic turn'. Clinton's unfortunate comments epitomise the tendency of governing elites to treat public questions as if they were a matter of technical expertise beyond the reach of ordinary citizens. Such tendency narrows the scope of democratic argument and hollows out the terms of public discourse, thereby producing a growing sense of disempowerment and discontent, the combustible source of populism.

Should it decide to take the full throttle moral campaign route, the challenge for the egalitarian educationist would be to learn from successful moral campaigns of yesteryear. Perhaps the most effective way to do this is by seeking to move its seemingly noble proposal from university halls and libraries to the consciousness of ordinary men and women, though media campaigns, public forums, civic education, etc. Currently, the proposal remains almost purely an academic exercise, known only in academic circles. For example, Wilkinson and Pickett's (2009, 2019) acclaimed works - The *Spirit Level* and *Inner Level* -, despite powerfully linking inequality to health and social problems, have not assumed the status of public manuals for social change, but remain hidden away on shelves of academics. And, there is some indication that the egalitarian advocacy would not proceed on a blank slate, but from a growing constituency of a public let down by the neoliberal promise. Some evidence suggests that the public are being swayed toward socialism by deepening inequality. A recent YouGov (2016)

poll found that only one in six people thinks capitalism is working well in Britain today, and that more young people have a favourable view of socialism than of capitalism. Indeed, this research has discovered similar socialist inclinations. Majority of stakeholders offering structural explanations, or rather comments deemed *supportive* of or *mixed* on the egalitarian proposal were either: teachers or pupils, linked to a lower strata of educational provision, or from the northwest region of England. This pattern suggests that affinity with an integrated school system flows from exposure to the injustice of the antithetical arrangement. In other words, the more one is exposed to the 'injustice' perpetuated by hierarchical school structures either, in terms of being its victim, or though awareness of it, the more they are likely to find favour with it. Indeed, parallels have been drawn between millennials (majority of teachers being millennials) and Gen Z's (majority being pupils) broader exposure to a variety of injustices, identities, lifestyles and cultures, through globalisation and social media, and their intolerance of associated injustices like racism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia, inequality, etc. According to the a report published by the right-wing thinktank Institute for Economic Affairs (IEA), for example, younger Britons have taken a decidedly left-wing turn on social issues, with seventy two per cent backing sweeping nationalisation, and sixty seven percent preferring to live under a socialist economic system (Niemietz 2021). Other data from a Harvard University (2016) study and a Gallup (2018) poll arrived at similar results in the USA. An effective egalitarian public campaign may be able to tap into such emerging social justice inclinations, thereby encouraging broader public embrace for educational reform in the egalitarian direction.

Finally, a more emphatic egalitarian advocacy may also benefit from the undiminished progressive tradition of English education, which led the struggle against selection in the 1950s and 1960s. Though today characterised by reduced confidence, its undented moral zeal, which is still embodied in a large section of the public, politicians and academics, could provide a

wellspring of passion for the struggle for the 'common school' (Benn 2018). Such moral zeal was evident in the comments of stakeholders like *Simon, Juan, Rudolf, Toti, Jeremy* and *Lorenzo*. As Toti passionately put it, 'It ain't fair, just ain't fair. If I, a 15 year old, can clearly see it, then our leaders are just ignoring it'.

And, if words were to always mean something, the advocacy could dig into the underbelly of contemporary UK social policy and capitalise on the cross-party consensus that education is key to enabling the realisation of a socially just society (Smith 2012). Such conviction is visible in extracts from the speeches of recent British political leaders:

> To those who say, 'where is Labour's passion for social justice?' I say education is social justice. Education is liberty. Education is opportunity. (Blair 1997)
>
> Education is the greatest liberator mankind has ever known, and the greatest force for social progress. (Brown 2007)
>
> Without good education there can be no social justice. (Cameroon 2007, p.84)
>
> My vision is of a school system that truly works for everyone (May 2016).

The advocacy could challenge UK governments on their own terms.

Finally, the egalitarian may benefit from the knowledge that success lies in patience and collaboration. A deep look at the global scene reveals that countries that have fashioned publicly supported, non-selective, high-quality universal education systems over the past few decades have done so through an often long, involved process of discussion and negotiation (Elliot 2007). The small crown dependency of Guernsey is the latest example that such moral campaigns mostly always bear fruit in the end. After decades of patient but consistent campaign against selection, in 2016 the island voted to transform its school system, converting a single grammar school and three secondary moderns into a unified system. From 2019, Guernsey had a fully comprehensive secondary school system, joining some of the most successful and modern education systems in the world (Benn 2018). The revelation by this research that the

egalitarian proposal is more popular with the younger generations (teachers and pupils), which is consistent with the evidence that neoliberalism's meritocratic stranglehold is wearing out amongst the young (YouGov 2016; Niemietz 2021), may suggests that the egalitarian advocacy, if consistent and emphatic in pursuing its vision, will achieve the reform it champions in the near future, when the millennials and Gen Zs assume the policy making role.

6.3.2 Implications for wider socio-economic inequalities

Like other sources of socio-economic inequality (e.g. technological change, globalisation, and healthcare) whose contribution to inequality can either be mitigated or exacerbated by governmental policy choices (Joyce and Xu 2019), it goes without saying that education systems contribute their fair share of social inequality (Bourdieu 1977, 1986). Research shows that this is more pronounced in hierarchical school jurisdictions like England than in more structurally equitable ones like Finland (OECD 2007; Wilkinson and Pickett 2009; Benn 2018). Not only have myriad studies revealed that English private schools aid the ring-fencing of elite professions (Friedman et al 2016; Social Mobility Commission 2019), this research has outlined (e.g. in chapter three) how all the structures the egalitarian educationist identifies for abandonment in the English state-sector enable the reproduction and closure of socio-economic privilege. It is exactly as Bourdieu (1984, 1993) had theorised it. Those entering the educational *field* harbouring the *capitals* that the *field* valorises have an upper hand in securing the incoming opportunities that are up for grabs in such *field*, thereby explaining education's key role in perpetuating social inequality. As Wilkinson and Pickett (2019) point out, 'the larger the income differences (within a country), the more strongly children's educational performance is marked by status differences' (p.171).

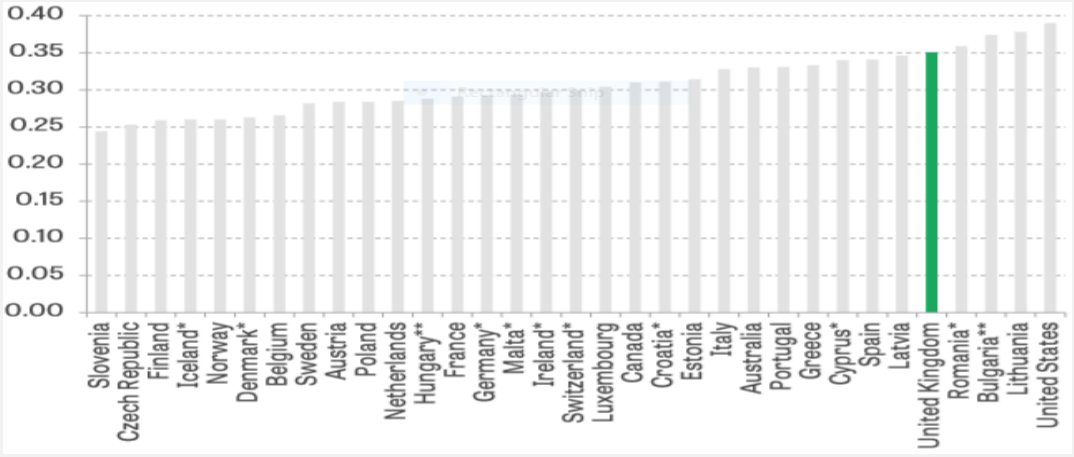
Education's contribution to socio-economic inequality is worsened by its central place in social life. As a crucial socialising agency, education is not only a key determinant of economic life

chances, but also confers on individuals skills that make the navigation of social life easier. That private education enables the elite to hoard the top echelons of careers, for example, is widely reported. The findings of a recent study by the Sutton Trust and the Social Mobility Commission (2019) is amongst the latest reminders of the extent to which private schools perpetuates/reproduce social inequality. Like numerous previous studies on the economic exclusivity of private education (Friedman et al 2016; Pells 2016; BBC 2017), the study confirmed that a tiny elite of privately educated people, many of whom went to Oxbridge, continue to dominate high-ranking jobs, where 39 per cent had an independent education, compared with 7 per cent of the general population. Researchers examined the educational backgrounds of more than 5,000 leading figures across nine broad categories including politicians, tech bosses, stars from the worlds of film, pop and sport, journalists, judges and FTSE 350 chief executives. They found that 65 per cent of senior judges, 57 per cent of members of the House of Lords, 59 per cent of civil service permanent secretaries and 52 per cent of Foreign Office diplomats come from a private school background. In the media, 43 per cent of the 100 most influential news editors and broadcasters, and 44 per cent of newspaper columnists went to fee-paying schools. In the arts, 44 per cent of top actors and 30 per cent of pop stars went to independent schools. It is the kind of reproduction of socio-economic exclusivity that stakeholders like *Simon, Graham, Rudolf* and *Juan* could not fathom, and, it is what might explain *Lorenzo's* guarded support for the hierarchical structures:

> One may not deny the role private school play in reproducing privilege. But, maybe we should just say that our society holds well with a school system that includes public schools. Maybe what you are suggesting would itself cause animosity. Denying families the right to pursue their dreams as they see fit, to use their money to secure a future for their children as they see it, might not be a good idea. And, it is not democratic.

Such evidence demonstrate that unimpeded structural reproduction of educational inequality can only make inequality worse. Because hierarchical educational structures perpetuate the concentration of incoming opportunities in a few hands (Bourdieu 1984, 1986), it is unsurprisingly the case that education is a major contributor to UK's current status as one of the most unequal countries in the OECD. UK has one of the highest Gini coefficients in Europe (*fig. 6.2*), partly fuelled by runaway rise in top incomes (Joyce and Xu 2019). Such income gap shows that the richest 20 per cent in the UK are over seven times richer than the poorest 20 per cent (Wilkinson and Pickett 2009 – *fig. 2.1*). And, compared to other continental European countries such as Denmark and the Netherlands, the share of income going to the 1 per cent richest households in the UK has nearly tripled in the last four decades, from 3 per cent in the late 1970s to around 8 per cent (Roser and Ortiz-Ospina 2016). The rise in top household incomes partly reflects a rise in earnings among high earners. The FTSE executives that research linked earlier to privileged private schooling (Sutton Trust and the Social Mobility Commission 2019) dominate this top 1 per cent. For example, average CEO pay among FTSE 100 companies in the UK in 2017 was 145 times higher than the salary of the average worker, up from just 47 times back in 1998 (High Pay Centre 2018). On the contrary, household earnings have stagnated towards the bottom of the distribution. After adjusting for inflation, the lowest-earning working households today earn little more than their counterparts in the mid-1990s (Joyce and Xu 2019).

Fig. 6.2: **Gini coefficient of equivalised net household incomes in selected countries, 2016**



Source: Joyce and Xu (2019): Analysis of 2019 OECD and 2019 World Bank data

Wilkinson and Pickett have drawn on a wider variety of international data to demonstrate the extent of inequality in modern Western market democracies (*fig. 2.1*), and to explain ways in which inequality is psycho-socially corrosive in unequal societies (*figures 2.2, and 2.3*). Such data show that inequality is 'causally' linked to any health and social problems with a social gradient: 'almost all problems which are more common at the bottom of the social ladder are more common in more unequal countries' (2009, p. 18). Because of its high levels of inequality, The United Kingdom features prominently in the data linking inequality to health and social problems. Compared to more equal countries like Finland, Denmark and Japan, where the gap between the richest 20 per cent and the poorest 20 per cent is half as big (*fig. 2.1*), people in the UK are more stressed and anxious, less happy and healthy, and have lower feelings of solidarity or trust across society (*fig. 2.2*).

Other egalitarian researchers have placed the surge in populism and the demise of established centre-ground political parties at the feet of growing inequality and a greater sense of economic insecurity (Sandel 2020; Joyce and Xu 2019). These have been most recently visible in Brexit and the rise of Far-Right populism in Europe and America. Yet, more others have linked inequality to environmental degradation and climate change (Monbiot 2017; Wilkinson and

Pickett 2009, 2019), and to deaths of despair (suicide, drug overdose, and alcoholism) which over the past two decades have risen dramatically, causing a reversal of America's working-class life expectancy not seen since 1918 (Case and Deaton 2020).

Without the interruption of education's handsome contribution to inequality, one can only presume that inequality, and the health and social problems linked to it will continue to plague Britain. This research suggests that this is what we must expect given the strong 'public' commitment to inequality-generating hierarchical structures on meritocratic grounds. Yet, one is equally bound to recognise the waning commitment to these structures amongst the younger stakeholders, and to anticipate a future in which the egalitarian dream of an integrated school system will become a reality. If the 1950s/60s progressive efforts against selection is anything to go by, a public characterised by a socialist mindset is a crucial constituency for a fully comprehensive school system (Benn 2018).

Chapter Seven – CONCLUSION

This research sought stakeholder opinion on the egalitarian structural account of educational inequality. The version of egalitarian advocacy put to the opinion of teachers, pupils and parents (drawn from the northwest and southeast regions of England) claims that hierarchical school structures are a major source of social injustice because they perpetuate/reproduce educational and wider socio-economic inequalities. As such, they should be abolished, and in their place installed a fully comprehensive school system in order that the noble end of a socially just education system be achieved without the powerful contribution of social class standing on the way (Tawney 1964; Reay 2017; Benn 2018). The egalitarian proposal is legitimised not only by Bourdieu's theory of human capital which demonstrates how the trilogy of *capital*, *habitus* and *field* interact to reproduce social privilege or disadvantage, but also by Wilkinson and Pickett's theory of 'causal' link between inequality and health and social ills which underscores why we should be concerned about systemic reproduction of inequality.

The structures the egalitarian educationist identifies for abandonment as a precursor to achieving the goal of 'common school' (Tawny 1964; Reay 2012) or a 'National Education Service' (Ben 2018; Corbyn 2019) include independent schools in the private-sector, and all manner of hierarchical provision in the state-sector, including, but not limited to, setting and streaming, school diversification, school choice, and selection. As demonstrated by literature in chapter three and stakeholder comments in chapter five, their hierarchical nature creates a strata of educational quality, with the upper echelons of such quality going to the middle and upper classes, thereby explaining why the English education system is a vehicle for reproduction and closure of privilege. On the contrary, evidence shows that the egalitarian-championed integrated conception of educational justice, which the acclaimed Finnish model exemplifies, allows parents to only secure their children advantages in ways that do not deny a decent life to the children of others (Reay 2012; Benn 2017). Such overwhelming evidence

leads this research to the view that the claim that hierarchical structures perpetuate educational inequality is not a matter of opinion but of fact. It is indeed a fact that English children's educational outcomes mirror the extent to which their socio-economic backgrounds can manipulate educational structures to their advantage. This seriously challenges the taken for granted notion that Britain is a fair society (DfE 2012) or the political consensus that education is a vehicle to social justice (Blair 1997; Brown 2007; Cameron 2007).

However, despite the strong evidence of classism in the English education system, the egalitarian proposal to banish the class-gap through flatter school structures did not find much sympathy with stakeholders. Respondents resoundingly rejected the proposal, overwhelmingly offering support for current structures. In dismissing the proposal, stakeholders rooted for the meritocratic conception of social justice, deeming the very structures the source of educational justice, primarily because they enable those talented or are hard-working to access the kind of education that is deserving of their ability and effort, and those lacking in these attributes to relegate themselves to inferior schooling arrangements (*Donald, Kuzo, Theresa, Tony, Ellie*). In other words, meritocratic practice delivers justice because it guarantees that 'hard-work', rather than ascription or nepotism, is rewarded, thereby enabling even those not lucky in the genetic or birth lotteries to rise (*Judith, Mo, Miranda*). Meritocratic appeal is also linked to stakeholder belief that the social inequality it generates reflects humanity's 'hierarchical nature' which is scripted such that the 'fittest' survive, as opposed to the 'levelling violence' that the egalitarian proposal would occasion (*Patricia, Janette, Tony, Ellie*). As such, the human-nature-fashioned social ranking that is built into meritocratic practice inspires competition, which in turn awakens humanity's creative potential, a core attribute for innovative curriculum design and societal progress (*Sandra, Martin, Miranda*). Moreover, stakeholders were wedded to the belief that since meritocratic practice is predicated on institutional diversity, it engenders choice, which in turn empowers families to select incoming

opportunities that best suit their needs, abilities and identities (*Asha, Kasim, Ita, Christi*). Yet, this research holds that such overwhelming attachment to hierarchical structures may not be equated to an outright endorsement of educational inequality. This is simply because it is based on the intuitive/trendy meritocratic account of social justice, which is largely ignorant of and eclipses a key ingredient of this story – the cosy relationship between structure and privilege (*Wiktoria, Christi, Jeremy, Phillip,* and *Simon).*

Egalitarians, in an attempt to understand the tyranny of merit, have explained stakeholder attachment to meritocratic themes like hard-work, natural talent and choice in terms of meritocracy's affinity with the 'belief in a just world' tradition, which presents socio-economic success as meritocratically earned and not conferred on individuals by ascription, nepotism or luck (Be´nabou and Tirole 2006; Mijs 2016; Sandel 2020; de Botton 2019). Such is appealing to individuals because it promises them that as far as access to social rewards is concerned the power is in their hands. Other egalitarians have situated meritocracy's popularity within powerful neoliberal narratives, such as the American Dream, which influential groups use to maintain their advantages through self-justification – a kind of 'false-consciousness' conveniently hatched to conceal structural injustice and to sell social inequality as beneficial and earned (Bowles and Gintis 1976; Monbiot 2017; Sandel 2020). Accordingly, the problem with meritocracy lies in the fact that its justification of inequality conceals the fact that neither talent nor hard-work is meritocratically earned (Sandel 2018; Rawls 1971). Indeed, as demonstrated in chapter six, the pillars on which stakeholders anchor meritocratic justification – natural talent, hard-work, choice, etc – can be faulted as products of natural and socio-economic contingencies for which no one can claim credit. It is for this reason that the structural account of educational inequality roots for distributive justice as equity. As competently articulated by Rawls' (1971) *Difference Principle*, only those inequalities that work to the benefit of the least well-off are just. Since it is clearly the case, at least in the English school

system, that meritocratic practice produces benefits that accrue mainly to the privileged, it must be unjust. Rawls argues that if you are bothered by basing distributive shares on factors arbitrary from a moral point of view, you don't just reject feudal aristocracy for a free-market. On the contrary, you set up a system where everyone, especially, those at the bottom benefit from the exercise of talents held by those who happen to be lucky.

However, in a liberal democracy like the UK, the fact that the meritocratic explanation of educational inequality is popular with all segments of the 'public' leaves the egalitarian/structural proposal, no matter how strong its moral justification, in tatters. It limits its policy viability, sucking from it any hope of democratic mandate. What makes matters even worse is the fact that the proposal in being expressed in a landscape which is very different from that of the 1950s/60s clamour for comprehensivisation when the Labour movement was very strongly committed to a fully-comprehensive education, and efforts of egalitarian researchers and politicians were emboldened by middle-class parents who resented their children being sent to second-rate secondary modern schools (Benn 2018). As left-wing veterans Jeremy Corbyn and Bernie Sanders had learnt only too well, neoliberalism rules in Britain and America. Corbyn's (2019) National Education Service, amongst other progressive proposals, did not see the light of day as 'Corbynism' was resoundingly defeated at the 2019 ballot. Neither did Sanders' (2020) highly acclaimed 'Medicare for All' appeal to Democratic Party voters. In the end, it is claimed, powerful neoliberal interests decisively sealed their fate. That might mean that in the current neoliberal environment, the only viable route available to the egalitarian proposal is taking the long trenches of moral advocacy. Such was the laborious and treacherous path taken by renowned advocacy movements like the American Civil Rights Movement, the Feminist Movement, and the LGBTQ Movement, before they were legally sanctioned. There must be something terribly moral in the argument that schooling should not be a vehicle for fixing the fate of those not lucky enough in the genetic/birth lotteries.

The remoteness of a structural policy intervention, given the tyranny of merit, can only mean that inequality will get worse since education is a powerful reproducer/perpetuator of inequality (Bourdieu 1993). The consequence of wayward inequality according to egalitarians is an unstable social environment and a degraded physical one (Wilkinson and Pickett 2009, 2019; Monbiot 2017; Sandel 2020). So, despite its overwhelming popularity as a justification of social inequality, meritocracy stands accused of aiding psychosocial and environmental ills. The narrative's inevitable consequence of social ranking (evident in the comments of stakeholders like *Carl, Patricia, Janette, Joroz and Stella*) has been linked to, among others, the pervasive discourse of 'deficits' which egalitarians argue poisons social relations through a victim-blaming charade that diverts attention from the structures that ensure that the working classes don't stand a chance (Reay 2017; Wilkinson and Pickett 2019; Sandel 2020). Social ranking is known to undermine self-esteem and to heighten status anxiety and status competition, which are key drivers of psychological stress, on the one hand, and narcissism and consumerism on the other. Both responses are further linked to withdrawal from social life, crime and violence, the epidemic of mental health, and environmental degradation (Monbiot 2017; Wilkinson and Picket 2019). And, according to social commentators like Sandel (2020) and Joyce and Xu (2019), meritocratic narrative is also the source of the explosive 'politics of humiliation', which, visible in the rise of Far-Right populism in Europe and America, is also linked to the sense of worthlessness and hubris that typify neoliberal societies. Those opting to express themselves politically this way have had their views hollowed out of democratic deliberation by what Sandel (2020) calls 'neoliberal technocratic turn' – the tendency of governing elites to treat ideologically contestable questions as if they were matter of economic efficiency, the province of experts.

7.1 CONTRIBUTION TO KNOWLEDGE

This research contributes to knowledge in a number of ways. First, it unearths widespread commitment to hierarchical school structures, or, more broadly, to a neoliberal conception of education. A large majority of educational stakeholders engaged in the course of this research appear wedded to neoliberalism's meritocratic account of social justice, which defines success as earned, an emblem of virtue (Wilkinson and Pickett 2019; Sandel 2020; de Botton 2019). As such, they deem a hierarchical school arrangement fair because it enables children to access the kind of education that suits their abilities and effort. On the contrary, their comments reveal a deep unease with the egalitarian-championed integrated school system, which they dismiss as a socialist utopia, a levelling violence against humanity's hierarchical nature, and a break on human progress because it frustrates diversity, freedom and innovation (*Michael, Patricia, Janette, Tony, Martin*). Such inclination appears to largely defy a regional or a socio-economically situated understanding of educational justice, at least as Bourdieusian *habitus* would have it, and reveals more of a national or a trans-class *habitus* (Thatcher and Halvorsrud 2016). It is paradoxical that this finding emerges against a backdrop of a strong egalitarian case, and extensive evidence showing that English educational outcomes are largely determined by family background (Benn and Millar 2006; Reay 2012, 2017; Benn 2018; Wilkinson and Pickett 2009, 2019; Social Mobility Commission 2019; Allen and Higham 2018). Yet, this pattern is not only consistent with the findings of YouGov (2011), Almas et al. (2019), Toynbee (2019); Wilkinson and Picket (2009, 2019); and Mijs (2019), which report a neoliberal triumph over hearts and minds in the public arena, but might also need to be read in conjunction with the apparent move of public consciousness and politics to the right in recent times, evident in right wing episodes like Brexit, the election of Donald Trump, and far right tendencies in Europe and America (Sandel 2020; Irwin 2018). As such, care must be taken not to label stakeholders in this research endorsers of educational injustice. I prefer the view that

this pattern occurs because stakeholder access to the more nuanced structural account of educational inequality is eclipsed by the pervasive meritocratic narrative (which they consistently brought to bear to justify hierarchical structures), a possible case of 'false-consciousness'. Consequently, stakeholder comments should be read as an endorsement of neoliberal structures, and not of educational injustice, which egalitarian advocacy argues those structures perpetuate.

Secondly, despite the fact that the egalitarian conception of education did not find favour with the majority of respondents, this research reveals some significant variability in stakeholder commitment to neoliberal structures, which too constitutes an important contribution to knowledge. Majority of stakeholders offering structural explanations, or rather comments deemed *supportive* of or *mixed* on the egalitarian proposal, hailed from the northwest of England (e.g. *Louise, Toti, Alice* and *Wiktoria*), were linked to a lower strata of school quality[14] (e.g. *Elliott, Sabiya, Steve* and *Phillip*), or were either teacher or pupil stakeholders (e.g. *Simon, Graham, Rudolf, Tabitha* and *Juan*). This pattern suggests that affinity with an integrated school system flows from exposure to the injustice of the antithetical arrangement. In other words, the more one is exposed to the injustice perpetuated by hierarchical school structures either, in terms of being its victim, or though awareness of it, the more one is likely to find favour with it. Teachers, pupils, those from the northwest, and those linked to grant-maintained and open-comprehensive schools, are more likely to either be direct victims of the injustices associated with a hierarchical provision or more directly exposed to it. Indeed, parallels have been drawn between millennials and Gen Z's broader exposure to a variety of injustices, identities, lifestyles and cultures, through globalisation and social media, and their intolerance of racism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia, inequality, etc. According to a report published

[14] Higher strata identified with grammar and private schooling, and lower strata with grant-maintained and Open-comprehensive.

by the Institute for Economic Affairs (IEA), for example, younger Britons have taken a decidedly left-wing turn on social issues. About seventy-five per cent blame capitalism for the climate emergency, seventy-two per cent back sweeping nationalisation, and sixty-seven per cent want to live under a socialist economic system (Niemietz 2021). Other data from a Harvard University (2016) study and a Gallup (2018) poll arrived at similar results in the USA. As for the higher teacher *support* or *mixed* response to an egalitarian education, this research attributes this pattern to teacher exposure to myriad data exposing class inequalities in the education system (e.g. those published by: Times Education Supplement, Education Policy Institute, Sutton Trust, Social Mobility Commission, the BBC and other media houses, their own schools, etc), or to the rationale behind interventions (policy or otherwise) targeting class-based educational inequality, including but not limited to: the introduction of comprehensive schooling (and the 'abolishment' of 11-plus selection), free school meals (FSM), educational maintenance allowance (EMA), Sure Start, Pupil Premium, the Teach First initiative, the Extra Mile project, the Aimhigher scheme, etc (Perry and Francis 2010). As for the regional variance in favour of egalitarian education for the Northwest, I believe this may be attributable to the Northwest's long standing socialist background (UK Parliament 2020) and to its lower GDP per capita (ONS 2018), both of which might heighten affinity with a structural explanation of social inequality for the same reasons.

Thirdly, by revealing a pattern that favours hierarchical educational structures, this research further contributes to knowledge by giving an insight into why the kind of educational reform associated with social democracies like Finland, and demanded by egalitarian educationists (Ball 2010; Reay 2017; Benn 2018), has been hard to come by, or may not be realised in the near future. Despite, political rhetoric emphasising the centricity of education to social justice (Blair 1997; Brown 2007; Cameron 2007; Gove 2010; May 2016; Corbyn 2019), this research reveals little 'public' thirst for an integrated school system, which seems to be a prerequisite

for such reform, as exemplified by social democracies like Finland or England's own clamour for comprehensivisation in the 1950s/60s (Benn 2018). Indeed, as egalitarian commentators Benn (2018), Goodson (2010), and Reay (2012) point out, Finland's egalitarian education system is attributable to its deeply entrenched systems of social democracy, a social context which they argue the UK lacks. The implication of this finding for this kind of educational reform is that it emboldens current governmental neoliberal orientations. This might explain the audacity of the egalitarian-derided stopgap interventions that have come to epitomise English educational reform in response to the class-gap (Perry and Francis 2010; Reay 2017). Other possible recent indicators of this trend is Theresa May's adamant selling of new grammar schools as a route to greater social mobility against the hard evidence that the net impact of selection is wholly negative for the poorest children (Andrews and Hutchinson 2016; Millar 2017; Reay 2017). Similarly, the absence of a strong egalitarian 'public' constituency may be linked to the boldness of state-sector marketization efforts, most evident in the meteoric rise of the academies programme (Allen and Higham 2018), and to the spectacular decline of compensatory programmes like Sure Start (Webb et al. 2015). These episodes offer a strong indication that without public pressure in the egalitarian direction, it is inconceivable that a mere socialist academic take on education can steer off a liberal government from a neoliberal trajectory. Whereas this research is not saying that the public approve of these neoliberal moves, it is equally telling that none of the significant transformations of the education system in the neoliberal direction have attracted public discord. Yet, this research believes that this trend may be reversed in the not distant future given the significant show of younger (pupils and teachers) stakeholders expressing sympathy with the structural account of educational justice (e.g. *Graham, Louise, Toti, Elliot* and *Juan*). This is due to the evidence (YouGov 2016; Niemietz 2021; Harvard University 2016; Gallup 2018) indicating that the younger generation (a significant number of teachers are millennials) have a stronger socialist inclination, a fact

that might suggest that the meritocratic stranglehold on stakeholders discovered in this research will wane with time, and that a Finland-like educational reform will be possible.

Finally, this research contributes to knowledge by unearthing a fundamental struggle between an intuitive and trendy account of social inequality, and a more nuanced, but largely 'inaccessible' explanation of the same. Whereas the former is the 'official' neoliberal account, and largely benefits from its public and policy dominance, claims of the latter are usually dismissed as socialist utopia, a levelling violence against humanity's hierarchical nature. Such duel is necessitated, not only by the authenticity accorded plural understanding of social life by the age of information, but also by the legacy of the 'neoliberal technocratic turn' (Sandel 2020) which has bred suspicion and cynicism toward elites and 'experts'. Yet, even though the neoliberally bulldozed meritocratic narrative (money does not grow on trees, Marxism/socialism is dangerous, free choice is ultimate, etc) has acquired the status of the 'natural' explanation of social inequality (Reay 2017; Toynbee 2019; Mijs 2019; Monbiot 2017), research shows that the structural account is the 'valid' explanation and the better one at aiding a healthy psycho-social environment (Wilkinson and Pickett 2009, 2019; Sandel 2020). It is indeed true that children's educational outcomes are largely determined by structural forces (e.g. family background and the structure of schooling), despite the trending narrative that it is talent and effort/ambition that deliver educational success. So, building a structurally more equal society in which all children thrive must be a good thing. Yet, in the post-truth age, the duel between these two accounts of social justice cannot be settled by wit or empirical evidence alone, but increasingly by how 'common' either account of social justice is in the public sphere and the ease with which its explanation of social inequality can be comprehended. This is partly because the post-truth age has a tendency to cast a shadow of suspicion on the more nuanced accounts of social life, deeming its claims to legitimacy arrogant elitism, an echo of Plato's dismissal of the voice of the 'many' for that of the 'few' experts

(Sandel 2020). Apart from inequality, the contest over the real meaning and implications of Brexit, Climate Change, immigration, and Covid-19 are some of the recent episodes typifying this duel.

Therefore, your guess is as good as mine as to which of these two accounts wins this explanatory duel. Whereas it is clearly the case that the meritocratic account of educational inequality wins the political/social policy argument, it is the structural explanation that wins the moral argument, simply because it is the truer account of the class-gap. Indeed, despite the tendency to think otherwise, the narrative that gets to pervade social consciousness and approval is not necessarily the valid one. Therefore, as observed in chapter five, liberal democracy must arise to the challenge that endorsement of hierarchical educational structures on the basis of the meritocratic account of social inequality by the citizenry is not equivalent to an endorsement of social inequality. This is because stakeholder access to the deeper and 'correct' explanation of social inequality is eclipsed by the more 'common' meritocratic narrative that pervades such neoliberal environments. Indeed, it is conceivable that stakeholders would not endorse hierarchical educational structures if they understood how those structures skew educational success toward privilege. As such, even though democratic mandate might arise out of such meritocratic posturing, neoliberal leaders must understand that such mandate is based on 'public' ignorance of the real determinants of education inequality, and build an education system that does not make class identities injurious. Otherwise, the warning by epidemiologists and environmentalists that the meritocratic narrative breeds psychosocial and ecological breakdown will come to pass.

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APENDIX ONE

8.1 SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW SCHEDULE – teachers, parents, pupils

Thesis Title:	Researcher details
The case for egalitarian education system in England: What is stakeholder opinion on abandoning classist structures?	Name: Antone Osindi, PhD student Contact: a.osindi@lancaster.ac.uk

Research Question
What is stakeholder opinion on the egalitarian proposal to abolish private schools and all manner of hierarchical structures in the English state sector as a precursor to eradicating classism in the English education system?

SECTION 1 – BIOGRAPHICAL DATA

1.0 Name: _____

1.1 Stakeholder type

Teacher	
Parent	
student	

1.2 Gender

Male	
female	
Other	

1.3 School type

Private school	
Grammar school	
Open comp.	
Grant maintained	

1.4 Region

Northwest	
Southeast	

1.5 Household income

£0 – £25,000	
£25001 – 50,000	
£50001 – 100,000	
Above £100,000	

SECTION 2 – OPINION AND REASONS

Intro: Egalitarian educationists are of the view that all forms of hierarchical educational provision (e.g. private schools, selection, setting and streaming, and parental choice) be abandoned in order to eradicate classism within the English education system. This interview seeks your opinion on this issue.

2.0 What is your overall thoughts on this proposal?

Retain	
abolish	
Not sure	

REASONS

_____

_____

2.1 Share your thoughts on the proposal to abandon the following school type/provision arrangements.

2.1.1 Private schools - private schooling, known for its excellence in attainment, is clearly a structure that gives those with economic capital a significant advantage e.g. because of the high fees they charge.

.

Abolish	
Retain	
Not sure	

Discussion prompts*
- Only 7% educated privately yet take almost 50% of Oxbridge places.
- Private schools offer bursaries to disadvantages pupils.
- Private schools enable the upper-classes to ring-fence high status positions across the economy.
- Private schools epitomise excellence which schools in the state-sector can emulate.

REASONS

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_____

2.1.2 State-sector selection - all forms of restrictions on entry e.g.11-plus exams.

Abolish	
Retain	
Not sure	

Discussion prompts*
- Top performing 500 comprehensive schools in England are highly socially selective, taking just 9.4% of pupils eligible for FSM compared to the average comprehensive at 17.2%.
- Selection by mortgage – poor parents cannot afford housing in the catchment area of successful schools.
- Pupils who are eligible for FSM are massively under-represented in grammar schools (Only 2.5%, compared with an average of 13.2% in all state-funded secondary schools).

REASONS

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2.1.3 Setting and Streaming - Research shows that even in 'open' comprehensives where most working-class students are to be found, middle and upper classes dominate top sets.

Abolish	
Retain	
Not sure	

Discussion prompts*
- Selection through the 11-plus exams replaced by selection through streaming.
- 'Natural ability' the basis for streaming, but is it?
- Link with league-tables – Schools resources disproportionately invested on 'those who can pass'

REASONS

_____

_____

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_____

2.1.4 School Diversification (Research shows that marketisation policies, known for their lax approach to regulation, have emboldened selection, thereby failing the social justice agenda the policies were predicated on.

Abolish	
Retain	
Not sure	

Discussion prompts*
- Faith schools most selective – three-times as socially-selective compared to their catchment area than non-faith schools, with an average 6% FSM gap, compared to 2%.
- Free schools are more selective than ordinary state schools. Only 10% on FSM compared to a national average at 16.7%
- Academies more selective than state comprehensives.

REASONS

_____

_____

_____

_____

2.1.5 School Choice (Research shows that school choice favours the middle and upper classes leading the most successful schools disproportionately admitting pupils from privileged backgrounds).

Abolish	
Retain	
Not sure	

Discussion prompts*
- ability to exercise choice comes with cultural, social and economic capital, explaining why the working-class are usually left with the choices that middle and upper classes do not want to make.

* Might be cited to encourage discussion but will not be used to sway opinion.