



Upwardly mobile

by John Dunford

'Britain's got talent' hardly needs saying to teachers who are constantly amazed by the achievements of the young people in our schools and colleges. However, it was good to see that ITV expressed the same sentiment in the title of its recent series of televised competitions.

I should at this point declare an interest – one of the finalists, Faryl Smith, is a Year 8 pupil at my wife's school, so I am biased in saying that the Great British Public got it wrong when they failed to vote her into the last three. Nonetheless, she has a voice like an angel and can, even at that tender age, move you to tears through her singing. She has a great future.

Putting my bias to one side, what struck me most about the competition was that so many of the best performers were so young, that they must have put in hundreds of hours of practice and that they were ordinary young people from ordinary homes doing extraordinary things. The best of them, like Faryl, will rise to great heights in their chosen field, provided that they receive the right amount of encouragement and support.

Whatever their start in life, these young people will go far. Their talent will, if properly nurtured, bring them upward social mobility in a way that many of our other talented young people will not manage to achieve.

Having just attended a two-day conference on social mobility, put on by the Sutton Trust and the Carnegie Corporation, these thoughts were uppermost in mind when I watched the ITV programme.

The strongest conclusion of the conference was the importance of a good start in life and the need for parenting programmes, such as home visiting, to ensure that all parents understand what can be done to stimulate the intellect of their babies.

Half the gap in school achievement is present on entry to school. All the factors affecting child development are correlated with income. Research has shown that moving all low income children into pre-school programmes could close the achievement gap by between 20 and 50 per cent.

Nonetheless, schools are constantly challenged to close the achievement gap. Reducing class size is often cited as an efficacious policy, since low achieving children can receive more individualized help. Yet, when this was tried in California, it created a shortage of teachers and, in the ensuing supply/demand imbalance, a shift of teachers occurred from low income to high income areas. Hardly the best way to close the gap.

With the changing nature of the labour market meaning that fewer unskilled jobs are available and those with higher skills and knowledge are in demand, the penalty for not having a good education has increased. As education has become more important for the labour market, inter-generational inequality has grown.

The disadvantages for some children may be built in from the outset, but the pressure will always be there for schools to perform well for their least advantaged pupils. It is still an open question as to which policies are most effective in narrowing the achievement gap.

Choice and diversity have been tried in some countries, including England. The argument in favour is that choice provides poor parents with the opportunities that wealthier parents have always had. The problem, of course, is that the wealthy are better at using choice than those with low incomes and so this policy tends to polarize the school system and widen, not narrow, the achievement gap.

Entry procedures for higher education are important in that poverty is negatively correlated with going to university. The National Council for Educational Excellence is working on its list of recommendations for schools and colleges to encourage more low income students to attend university.

Most countries have, in one way or another, used funding policy to help to reduce disadvantage, but there is a lack of clarity in the UK about how funds are targeted, leading to inefficiency in the distribution mechanism.

The current favourite among policy makers is accountability, and it was interesting to hear at the conference how performance in New York schools under the strong leadership of the Chancellor of New York City schools, Joel Klein, had improved. Joel Klein has an impressive cv, including four years as assistant attorney general in the Clinton administration, leading the anti-trust division that prosecuted Microsoft and other major companies.

The sharp accountability system in New York may have some design faults, but it is clearly targeted at raising the achievement of the poorest children in a way that has never previously occurred in that city, where the school system is roughly the same size as that of Sweden.

Klein has given considerably more power and budgetary control to school principals, set them tough targets, offered them substantial bonuses if their schools are successful (and the whole staff of a school in a poor area receives a cash bonus if the school performs well), and increased the number of sackings of unsuccessful principals. But, because helping the poor is a priority, the balanced scorecard of the accountability system has a strong focus on the achievements of the lowest performing pupils in each school.

I contrast this with the recent announcement in England of the target for all schools to have 30 per cent of their students achieving at least five GCSE high grade passes, with 638 schools falling below that line and being accused in the national and local media of failure, with dire consequences for their future intake.

There was a passing acknowledgement that many of these schools had had good or outstanding Ofsted reports, that 250 of them had CVA scores over 1000 and that many are on a rising tide of achievement. There was no incentive in the announcement for the other 2800 secondary schools to raise the achievement of their weaker students. No, the focus was on school performance, not student performance, and certainly not on prior attainment or social mobility.

The design features of an accountability system matter. Accountability itself can be a positive or a negative force – it depends how it is carried out.

In that context, we have the current proposals from Ofsted for a new inspection framework. Some of the proposals are a step forward: less frequent inspections of good and outstanding schools, more engagement with school leaders, improved judgements on leadership, clearer criteria for each category, better inspection of partnership working.

Other aspects need to be changed: unannounced inspections, more frequent inspections for schools at the ‘lower end of satisfactory’, more emphasis on attainment (raw results) and less on CVA, national surveys of parents (that’s the job of school self-evaluation), telling the school what action is needed, and the letter to parents. The last three points are examples of bad aspects of accountability as Ofsted threatens to stray into areas that are properly the job of the school itself.

If we are serious about social mobility in the UK, where the gap between rich and poor is growing, there is some serious thinking to be done in government about the policies that will best raise mobility.

Accountability is one of the strongest weapons at the disposal of policy makers, and yet so little attention is given to the overall design of an intelligent accountability system in the public services or to ways in which accountability can promote or hamper social mobility.

That schools and colleges have an important part to play in increasing social mobility cannot be doubted, but accountability is about sticks and carrots and, at present, neither the sticks nor the carrots are the right ones, especially in the 638 schools.

In the inspiring words of Joel Klein, which could be echoed by many teachers working in deprived communities: “People told me that you can’t fix education until you have fixed poverty, but I say that you can’t fix poverty until you’ve fixed education.”

It takes more than a television series to ensure that the talents of ordinary children can flourish, no matter what their background. Teachers and their leaders have a vital role in raising educational attainment and improving the lives of disadvantaged young people. Accountability has a big part to play in increasing social mobility, but the policy makers have a long way to go before they find the right levers to make this happen.

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