**The truth is that schools do little to reduce inequality**

Education cannot compensate for the failure to implement redistributive social policies

One casualty of Covid was the UK exam season, which was cancelled for two years due to lockdowns. A-level grades were set by schools instead, with little external moderation and, unsurprisingly, shot up, meaning a lot more young people than usual found themselves at highly selective universities. This year, the government began the painful job of resetting and deflating the system. Inevitably, that meant more missed university offers, causing angst for students and parents caught up in the mess.

It’s important to remember, though, that the post-Covid resumption of this annual bunfight over places at the most selective or “high-tariff” institutions predominantly affects only a small portion of society. Around five times more students from the highest-income quintile will end up at these high-tariff universities, with all the future benefits that brings, than will make it from the lowest income one.

A comprehensive overview from the Institute for Fiscal Studies earlier this month showed just how embedded social inequality is in the education system. There has been virtually no change in the school “disadvantage gap” between children on free school meals and their peers in the past 20 years. The belief that education can somehow “fix” inequality seems unfounded.

That doesn’t mean education policymakers shouldn’t consider inequality in their decisions. It’s certainly possible to make society even less fair by making it easier to buy access to premium institutions. We can see this in the remaining parts of the UK with grammar schools, which are dominated by the children of parents who can afford tutors, and where those from low income families do particularly poorly.

Moreover, as the IFS point out, the funding system for English schools has become significantly less progressive over the past decade and the adult skills system is a mess, all of which makes it harder to mitigate inequalities. Austerity has also taken its toll: the financial gap between private and state schools has doubled since 2010. But even if there was, as there should be, an entirely comprehensive system, funded at a substantially higher level, it would not come close to fixing inequality.

For a start, in a free, liberal society it is not possible or desirable to prevent parents doing whatever they can to support their children, and inevitably those with more resources will find ways to play the system and gain advantage. It’s also the case that any improvement in state schools will benefit all pupils, rich and poor. Overall, the school system has got better over the past few decades, but the disadvantage gap has stayed the same. We can hardly expect schools deliberately to withhold support from better-off students.

Politicians, from all parties, love the idea that education is the answer to inequality. It’s intuitively plausible, appeals to those who see personal merit and hard work as the primary cause for differences in wealth, and avoids having to talk about the real problems. But the reality is that states can only meaningfully reduce inequality by providing substantial financial support to those who need it, through either the welfare system or labour market interventions. The most equal countries in the world are not those with the best education systems but those with more redistributive social policies.

At the moment, financial support in England is getting less generous. Arbitrary benefits caps introduced by the government in 2016 are combining with an inflationary crisis to push ever more people into very deep poverty and destitution. It is ludicrous to expect schools to salvage a situation in which children are going hungry and cold in overcrowded, dilapidated housing. If, as a society, we genuinely care about reducing poverty, we have some obvious levers to pull that we are choosing to leave untouched.

None of this means that education is not vital to society and the economy. Under-investment, particularly in upper secondary and tertiary vocational education, is one cause of the UK’s multi-faceted productivity challenge. A better-educated citizenship is a noble goal that brings many benefits to a society. But, once a country has moved past full access to schooling, education will do little to reduce inequality if all the main drivers of that inequality are left in place. Pretending it can do so is preventing us from acknowledging what really needs to change.