

Top British educational advisor insists achievement is genetically determined

By Jo March
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In an effort to justify the destruction of any vestiges of a comprehensive education system in the UK, a leading Conservative Party education advisor, Dominic Cummings, recently claimed that individual child performance is mainly based on genetics and a child's intelligence quotient (IQ).

Cummings, described as “the most influential adviser to the education secretary in the past five years”, has written a 250-page paper which essentially argues that a well-rounded education for working class children is a waste of money.

He attacks the broad-based higher education system which in the past 40 years had become more accessible to working class students, claiming that general government spending amounting to over half a trillion pounds a year is of dubious value and “of which vast amounts are wasted and it could easily divert a few billion pounds if it could prioritise to strengthen world-class humanities, maths and science departments.”

He questions the relevance of many degree courses, writing, “In many third-rate higher education institutions there is a large amount of ‘social science’ work in economics, anthropology, sociology, literary theory and so on of questionable value both from an intellectual perspective and from the perspective of students, jobs prospects.”

The Sure Start programme, which provides Family Health, Early Years Care and Education and Improved Well Being Programmes, should be scrapped, he insists, “There is great political pressure to spend money on things like Sure Start, but little scientific testing, refinement and changing budgets to reinforce demonstrated success. Therefore billions have been spent with no real gains.”

What he really means by this statement and his assertions about genetics is that no monetary gains are made for the ruling class by providing this or any other services, which are being targeted by governments around the world in an effort to make the working class pay for the crisis of capitalism.

Cummings is asserting that working class children are genetically incapable of learning at a high level, as an

excuse to make it impossible for working class children to do so—a process already well underway with the introduction of £9,000 per year fees for university education.

“There is strong resistance across the political spectrum to accepting scientific evidence on genetics,” he proclaims. “Most of those that now dominate discussions on issues such as social mobility entirely ignore genetics and therefore their arguments are at best misleading and often worthless.”

Cummings claims research shows that as much as 70 percent of a child's performance is genetically derived—and that therefore social class and the natural advantages it brings must be a function of intelligence.

He cites as proof the work of geneticist Robert Plomin, of the Institute of Psychiatry at King's College London. Plomin examined a region of chromosome 6 in children with ultra-high IQs and children with average IQ.

He found that those with ultra-high IQs were twice as likely to have a particular variant of the insulin-like growth factor 2 gene (IGF2). Nevertheless, only half of the ultra-high IQ participants had this variation. This at best only accounts for about two percent of the variation in human intelligence.

This also accepts IQ scores as a legitimate and reliable measure of intelligence. This measure has been much contested by psychologists—especially for being inherently biased culturally toward the middle and upper classes.

In contrast, there is ample research evidence to show that environment—primarily associated with social class—plays the overriding role in educational development. Well-respected studies show, for example, that when children from poor backgrounds were adopted into culturally-rich middle class families, their IQ scores grew (Scar and Weinberg, 1976, Schiff et al, 1978).

And of course, when one speaks of a household being “culturally rich”, this means, in addition to parental help, private tutors, and strenuous efforts to secure a place in better schools—either by direct purchase of private education or at the very least by having the required post-code to secure access to the best the state-funded system can offer.

The phenomenon of the ruling class either misusing or distorting genuine scientific research to justify its prejudicial actions is hardly new. Neither is the use of pseudo-science to prove the innate superiority of the upper classes. In the 19th century, tracts were written on Craniometry to “prove” that black people had smaller brains and were somehow less human, a theory that was utilised to justify slavery. Social Darwinism—the claim that societies also embodied the principle “survival of the fittest”, in a way never advanced by the great scientific thinker—became widespread. This type of thinking reached its apotheosis in the Nazi theory of the “*untermensch*” and the “*master race*.”

In the most recent period, a host of right-wing authors have become fashionable in ruling circles for advancing “genetic-based” justifications for every social malady, from crime to poor educational performance—including Charles Murray and the late Richard J. Herrnstein.

Murray and Herrnstein published *The Bell Curve*. In a 1996 lecture, “Equality, the Rights of Man and the Birth of Socialism,” WSWS chairman David North observed that its popularity lay in the fact that “The essential thesis of Herrnstein and Murray is that social inequality is the natural and legitimate expression and product of genetically-determined mental capacities. The rich are rich because they have superior genes. The socializing and intermarriage of the rich is preserving a gene pool that tends to guarantee wealth and success for their offspring.”

The reason many working class children do not succeed educationally has nothing to do with genetics and everything to do with poverty, bad housing, unhealthy diets, and an educational system designed to discourage success for the majority of children.

The 1944 Education Act brought in by the National Government under Winston Churchill established an elitist tripartite system of grammar, secondary modern and secondary technical schools. This was designed to limit access to an academic education primarily to upper and middle class children able to pass the 11 plus exam, while the rest were expected to leave school at 14 and learn a trade or work in factories.

In the 1960s, a period of the upsurge of the working class and of economic growth that required a more educated workforce, the Labour government required local councils to move away from selection and establish Comprehensive Schools, open to all. Even then some counties such as Kent still maintained selective tests.

An attack on comprehensive education was first initiated by Labour Prime Minister James Callaghan in 1976, who lined up behind an ongoing Conservative backlash. Streaming and setting, enabling selective education according to ability either within common classes or in

separate classes, were never wholly abandoned even in comprehensive schools. They were brought back with a vengeance by the Conservative governments of the 1980s and 1990s.

In 1993, all primary schools were encouraged to introduce setting by the Department for Education (DfE Report, 16/93), leading to a situation where some primary schools organise children into “ability” tables from as young as five.

Segregation was further exacerbated by the publishing of school league tables, whereby those who can afford to move house and flock to “achieving” schools and children of poor families are ghettoised into “failing” schools.

The claims by Education Secretary in Michael Gove to want to “raise standards” by using more rigorous inspections by the government inspection service Ofsted is a cynical lie. It is designed to “prove” that schools are failing, to put them into “special measures” and force them into becoming Academies as a precursor for the full scale privatisation of education in the UK.

This endgame is made abundantly clear by Cummings approval of Gove’s “reforms”. “Hopefully, it will push the English system towards one in which the state provides a generous amount of funding per pupil, which parents can spend in any school they wish, breaking down the barrier between private-state school, while the Department for Education does little more than some regulatory accountancy, and due diligence functions,” he wrote.

As is made clear by Labour’s latest embrace of privately-run Free Schools, all three of the major parties are in complete agreement that free comprehensive education for all should be a thing of the past. They agree that working class children should only be taught the minimum required to enable them to work cheaply and not question the conditions that are imposed on them.

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