

Ignorant Yobs?

The education and training of 'low attainers'

Review of *Ignorant Yobs? – low attainers in a global knowledge economy* by Sally Tomlinson, 151 pages, ISBN 978-0-415-52577-0 (pbk), £22.99.

What is to be done, asks [Sally Tomlinson](#), about low attainers? The question refers to about a fifth of the children and young people in countries such as the UK, Germany and the United States and refers not only to education and training systems but also to social, political and economic policies. It is also, clearly, a moral question.

Polite and apparently objective alternatives to the term 'low attainers' include or have included less able, backward, retarded, slow learners, below average, special needs. Terms which are rather less polite and neutral appear daily in the media and in middle-class conversations – yobs, chavs, feckless, lazy, plebs, underclass, dull, thick, shirkers, scroungers. Either way the language is pejorative, and the attitudes are at best paternalistic and patronising and at worst fearful, demonising and punitive.

What to do about low attainers has been a question for western governments at least since the start of compulsory education some 150 years ago. When unskilled or semi-skilled work in agriculture or manufacturing was readily available, the answers were not too difficult to find. Now that such jobs have declined or disappeared in western countries, and that enterprises operate in global not national contexts, the answers are much more elusive. Sally Tomlinson explores the difficulties and dilemmas with regard to five countries in particular – Finland, Germany, Malta, United Kingdom and United States. Her analysis and conclusions are relevant for a wide range of countries, not for these five only.

The book is intended in the first instance for Tomlinson's fellow academics and for serious students. But it should also be required reading for policy-makers, managers and practitioners, and for educational journalists, social commentators and public intellectuals. It has a vivid sense of history, with its many references to the nineteenth century and early twentieth century. It is also, however, thoroughly familiar with the academic literature of the last few years. The author has held chairs at the universities of Lancaster and Swansea, and at University of London Goldsmiths College. Currently she is emeritus professor at Goldsmiths and a senior research fellow at Oxford. Her publications over the years have focused on educational policy, special education, home-school relations, and education for race equality.

There are differences amongst the five countries under consideration, not least since Finland contains much less material inequality than the others, and employs a much more highly trained teaching force. But all are faced with the same set of choices in general terms, and each is inclined to adopt policies that

work against the interests and needs of the poorest and most vulnerable members of society. The latter include not only the indigenous working class doing unskilled work but also migrants and minorities.

One possible approach would be to focus on economic restructuring with a view to creating full employment and providing a living wage even for the least skilled jobs. This approach would be accompanied by measures to include, enfranchise and engage all people not only in the economy but also in social and political life.

An alternative approach, the one which western governments in fact adopt, is to focus on the poor qualifications and 'low aspirations' of young people deemed to be low attainers, and to inflict on them more and more tests and examinations, and an increasingly relentless striving for certificates and grades – 'education, education, education'. This approach is accompanied by measures whose function (though not declared aim) is to enable middle-class parents to educate their children in schools that have low proportions of low attainers, and where there is less chance, they hope and assume, of becoming branded as failures themselves. Such measures are proposed and implemented with rhetoric about choice and freedom, hence for example through charter schools in the United States and academies and free schools in England. They consolidate a distinction between academic and vocational education that is essentially a class divide, and are harmful not only for young people and their families but also for the health and cohesion of wider society.

[In a scathing critique of a recent speech by Ed Miliband](#), Danny Dorling pointed out, in effect, that current educational policies make a mockery of rhetoric about big society, social cohesion and One Nation. Miliband was ostensibly speaking about race, immigration and social cohesion; we must reject the belief, he said, 'that people can simply live side by side in their own communities, respecting each other but living separate lives, protected from hatreds but never building a common bond - never learning to appreciate one another. We cannot be comfortable with separation. It blocks opportunities, leaving people at the margins. And it breeds ignorance, suspicion and prejudice.'

Dorling commented that 'Ed would be right if he were talking about class, income and wealth; about how the top public schools are moving away from the lower private schools, about how state school league tables now determine local rents, about how we never learn to appreciate each other if we live parallel lives, working in the same offices but having less and less in common with those on different floors of the building, or those who come in to clean our workplaces, or those who come in to run them. Economic separation blocks opportunities. It leaves people at the margins. It breeds ignorance, suspicion and a nasty temptation to deflect the argument onto race, language and immigration.'

That said, issues of race, language and immigration are of course significant and urgent matters in their own right- they intersect with issues of class, income, wealth and status and cannot be treated as if they are no more than convenient

distractions from realities more essential than themselves. The same is true in relation to ability and disability, and to gender and sexuality.

Tomlinson's book is a timely and impressive contribution to the academic and political debates and concerns which Dorling so vividly evoked. In the field of education, the book is particularly relevant to discussions and considerations of the coalition government's pupil premium grant (PPG). The Labour Party leadership urgently needs to speak up on these matters.

Source: blogpost by Robin Richardson for Left Central, 2013.