

Teachers' attitudes towards worldwide socio-economic inequality

In this thinkpiece, Anna Barford addresses the following questions:

- (1) is inequality more or less acceptable if you are relatively poor? And,
- (2) what arguments are used to justify or challenge inequality?

Anna reports on the overlaps and differences in attitudes towards inequality in Kenya, Mexico and the UK. Despite these three countries being differently positioned in the world economic structure, there are surprising similarities in the teachers' arguments that implicitly support inequality. However, when teachers argued against inequality, stronger and more politicised critiques came from Mexico and Kenya. This may be due to the differences in how inequality is experienced. The thinkpiece will be of interest those who work on global issues of development and justice with UK teachers.

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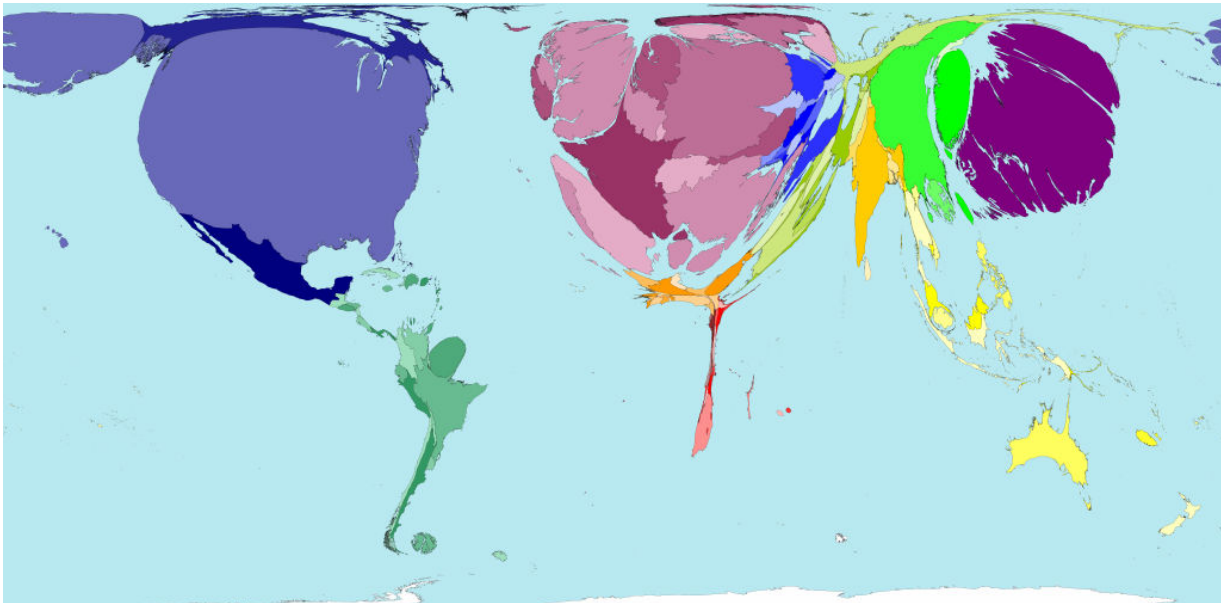
The research

This research focuses on how socio-economic inequality is spoken about in three countries, ranging from poorer to richer: Kenya, Mexico and the UK. The motivation stems from having observed vast international differences in well-being and wealth, as shown in maps such as the one below. I became interested in how people in diverse socio-economic positions understand this inequality. Put simply, is inequality more or less acceptable if you are relatively poor? And, what arguments are used to justify or challenge inequality?

My comparative approach aimed to investigate the similarities and differences of opinion between socio-economic positions within the same economic order. In each country, discussion groups were run with secondary school teachers from a wide variety of schools in rural and urban, poorer and richer locations. Perhaps the biggest contrast is between the teachers in a school in the Kibera slum in Nairobi and those working at private schools in England. These three countries were chosen due to their different levels of Gross Domestic Product per person, but quite similar levels of inequality (although the UK is more equal than Kenya and Mexico, wealthier countries are generally more equal than poorer countries). These countries are physically distant from one another, so any similarities would not be the result of simple geographical proximity. Choosing teachers as participants kept occupation and social status of participants relatively stable between locations.

In total, 100 teachers participated in these groups, and group size ranged from 2 to 8 people. The discussion took roughly 90 minutes, and covered questions about the causes and consequences of inequality. The discussion was structured using a series of 7 questions, starting with what inequality means, in order to begin the discussion simply and develop a working definition. Next I asked whether they were aware of inequalities at the world scale, followed by asking about the causes of inequality, and then enquiring about the importance of inequality as an issue. I introduced some visualisations of inequality and asked for comments on these, and then asked about the positive and negative aspects of inequality. To round up the discussion participants were asked to comment on how frequently they discuss inequality, hopefully ending the group on a positive note¹.

The main finding was that remarkable similarities exist in the arguments teachers use to justify inequality. This includes their interpretation that the poor have different needs to the rich, and that inequality is natural and motivates people to work harder. The main difference was the form that critiques of inequality took. Lack of respect and inferiority were widely felt, and overtly discussed, as problems of inequality in the middle-income and poorer countries. However in the UK these themes did not arise; discussion was more focused on personal guilt and resultant 'good behavior' such as donations to charity. (Please note that these themes were not explicitly prompted, but arose in response to the questions above, and at times explanations were probed with extra questions).



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GDP Wealth in 2002.

Territory size shows the proportion of worldwide wealth, that is Gross Domestic Product based on exchange rates with the US\$, that is found there.ⁱⁱⁱ

Justifying inequality

The ways in which inequality was supported included defenses that argued inequality is not a problem if the poor are happy, or presenting inequality as natural and even inevitable. Together these arguments present an obstacle to moving towards greater equality, because inequality is framed as being unproblematic, thus quelling the impetus for change. Below are some quotations from the discussion groups, to illustrate the arguments. I start with the argument that inequality is not a problem if the poor are happy:

“In Chiapas there are people who are happy with \$2 per day.”

(Mexican urban teachers)

Here the poor are framed as distant from the more affluent speaker, which allows them to be imagined as having fundamentally different needs and aspirations. The quotation refers to the relatively poor district of Chiapas, in southern Mexico. A similar comment from a group of Kenyan trainee teachers suggested that \$2 is even *too much* in the *shamba* (countryside). Similar distancing and distinction was seen in UK groups:

“I’ve never lived on one dollar a day, but some people might just be genuinely happy with that, they’ve got enough for them to stay healthy and, ok, maybe that’s very extreme, but you know who are we to say ‘POOR THEM?’”

(UK urban trainee teachers)

This quotation uses the idea of the happy poor to warn against patronising pity, as though pity and apathy were the only possible responses to poverty. This seems to justify the opinion that poverty is OK if you are happy. However, elevating happiness to the position of the arbiter of right and wrong diminishes the importance of economic justice. If the poor were all happy, if everyone were happy, would gross differences in life chances be acceptable? Economist Amartya Sen points out that bearing adversity cheerfully does not mean that there is no adversityⁱⁱⁱ. Sen argues that happiness is not a marker of material well-being, and of course material poverty remains a disadvantage even if you have a happy disposition.

Moving to the argument that inequality is natural, the following quotation compares society to a balanced ecosystem, with each person complementing others:

“... you can't do away with inequality, and a good example is in the forests, a very natural environment, a very natural forest, you have those big trees that are able to grow up and get sunshine and carry out photosynthesis, and you have the small trees that will have to coil around it, so that they have to depend on the big trees for the sunlight ... so we can't be equal.”

(Kenyan high-achieving urban government school)

In this quotation the big trees correspond to powerful people, whose success is attributed to their ability to grow or take opportunities. The dependence of 'smaller people' upon the *big men* refers to tribal and family responsibilities to help the others. In imagining the structure of a forest, society is simplified and its functionality is emphasised.

Focusing on natural forces positions people as passive: “So we may not be able to change, it would be hard to change completely.” (Kenya rural government school).

Here the authority of nature stems from the idea that nature, including human nature, is a powerful and unalterable force. The implicit suggestion is that if inequality is natural we may renounce responsibility. However, inequality *is* manageable through policies amongst other mechanisms, despite these arguments suggesting otherwise. The immense variation in levels of inequality internationally and the rises and falls of inequality in the UK over time with variations in political and economic systems, exemplifies that inequality levels are not set at some “natural” level.

Challenging inequality

In this section, I show ways that teachers challenged inequality. These included identifying instances of being treated as inferior, and recognising that inequality is bad for everyone, not just the poor. In general the Kenyan and Mexican teachers posed stronger challenges to inequality, whereas in the UK inequality was often seen as a problem that could be slightly alleviated by charitable donations. An exception to this pattern was a British woman who argued that inequality is degrading for everyone. Below, a Mexican teacher transfers small scale ethics of sharing to the world scale:

“Your father has nothing to eat today, your mother has no work, your children

have nothing to eat, but you? You have 100 pesos and your sister has 100 pesos. So together you spend the 200 pesos so that the whole family can eat. But no, 'I'm going to spend my money on myself'. But it's YOUR mother, it's YOUR father. It's the same at the world level."

(Mexican small rural school)

By scaling-up the ethics of the small scale, such as a strong feeling of responsibility for others, world inequalities were challenged. This rescaling facilitated an ethical and emotional discussion about world inequality, something that is more widely discouraged by the 'economic rationality' commonly applied to inequality. The quotation illustrates how emotional engagement with inequality can form part of a critique. However, socio-economic distance undermined participants' responses at times:

"But I do have moments when I think 'God, this is, I cannot live with this, it is awful, how can this be?', you know. And then obviously ... you're not actually affected by it, and I think maybe I'm just being a middle class white woman having a little bit of a worry, and then I'll buy something fairtrade and it will be OK."

(UK urban private school)

Here the teacher is deeply concerned about world inequality, describing it as *awful*. Yet she then undermines her response by suggesting that her middle class, female, whiteness distances her from the issue and implying she may be overly emotional, and dismissing it as *a little bit of a worry*. As with many of the UK groups, there was a pervasive politeness and participants rarely stated that inequality is a problem without adding a caveat or apology.

When challenging inequality there is a general divergence between countries. Mexican and Kenyan participants described a division of respect, where the rich are seen as being in a superior position and the poor internalise their treatment as inferior. Lack of respect is accompanied by a sense of powerlessness, particularly in political or economic negotiations. In Mexico and Kenya participants reported how poorer countries are manipulated by richer countries:

"At the world level there are countries that are supposedly the powerful ones, and they are the ones that are almost moving the world. The smaller countries are those that are doing nothing more than depending on other countries. So, there is a lot of inequality."

"We're nothing more than their game of chess."

(Mexican small rural school)

"... the serious issue is that some of the developing countries [...] don't price their products by themselves. They are priced by the buyers, and you see when you can't price your product by yourself you may not sell it at a competitive price that is going to help you, you are likely to sell it at a price that is going to benefit

the buyer. And at the end of the day, you feel inferior, or unequal.”

(Kenyan high-achieving urban government school)

These quotes suggest that business-as-usual results in poorer people not being in control of their lives; feeling (and being) manipulated and disrespected.

In some of the UK groups there was an implicit sense of superiority, which was not overtly discussed. These participants often expressed discomfort about world inequality, and then stated their confidence in international aid to address inequality. A major exception is the woman quoted below, an uncommonly defiant UK voice against inequality:

“You know there’s a level at which I want to resist the talk that goes, you know, ‘look at us, aren’t we so wealthy, aren’t we well off, compared to all these other people who are poor,’ because, because I think we are badly off. We are badly off because we have more than others.”

“Yes!”

“Inequality is BAD for human beings. It’s bad for their life to have more than others. It’s not that we are better off, we could only be described as better off if we thought that success means having more than the next person. Which I don’t. I, I, the problem is the gap. That’s what I see, the problem is the gap.”

(retired urban teacher, UK)

This was the only engagement with the argument that inequality is detrimental for the wealthy as well as the poor, and elsewhere it is backed up by evidenceⁱⁱⁱ. This approach poses a challenge because it highlights that we all suffer from inequality, and thus greater equality would have a universal benefit.

Reflection

These apparently contradictory strands of reasoning coexist amongst groups, and within individuals. We have a range of explanations for inequality available to us, and which of these dominate in a particular conversation is influenced by the politics of those present and their position within the wider context. Those who are closer to the most damaging aspects of world inequality tend to have a more critical approach than those who have a greater social (and often physical) distance. These explanations can act as obstacles to, or calls for change.

Some framings of inequality as unproblematic present an obstacle to moving towards greater equality because the impetus for change is quelled. Similarly, the idea that inequality is natural can mean that belief in human agency to change inequality levels is overridden by “the irresistible authority of a law of Nature”ⁱⁱⁱ. The teachers in this study who most effectively challenged inequality did so by focusing on inequality as an ethical problem that is human-made, acknowledging that we are all affected by inequality and bear mutual responsibility. This is done by naming the economic system in which we live, and historical legacies upon which the current world system

rests (see Barford, 2010, chapter 7). Encouraging empathy and respect for others undermines unequal distributions of resources and life chances.

An important message to come from this work is that much can be learned about inequality at the world level from talking to people in diverse socio-economic positions. This can uncover the ideas and understandings that support and challenge world inequalities. These findings suggest that the energy for change may well come from poorer and middle-income countries, as they are the source of the strongest critiques of the status quo. Perhaps because people in poorer countries see and experience the more challenging aspects of world inequality.

These findings also emphasise the importance of the vocabulary and analogies used to discuss inequality. A careful consideration of the meaning and rhetoric in day-to-day discussions about inequality can help us acknowledge the ways in which we might, at times unwittingly, support or challenge existing inequitable distributions of resources. Lastly, listening to others' understandings not only broadens our own understandings of world inequality and enhances empathy over socio-economic distances, but also offers new ways of framing our own discussions. This could help move discussions closer to recognising contemporary world inequality as being unacceptable.

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End Note

ⁱⁱⁱ Barford, Anna. "An international comparative study of attitudes towards socio-economic inequality". PhD thesis. September, 2010. Available at: www.dart-europe.eu

ⁱⁱⁱ www.worldmapper.org

ⁱⁱⁱ Dorling, D., Newman, M. and Barford, A. (2008) The atlas of the real world. London, Thames Hudson. Also published in the South Korea, Japan, United States, France, Italy, Germany and the Netherlands.