The Economist’s Society: Review on Robert Cassen’s – ‘Can Education Overcome Social Disadvantage?’ talk

On Tuesday 22nd October, UCL welcomed Professor Robert Cassen, of The Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion, to give an insightful and comprehensive talk on whether education can overcome social disadvantage. In short, his answer was no, although he believes education has a majorrole to play, and could do much more to reduce the probability that those with a poor start in life would do badly in school.

Firstly, Professor Cassen described the magnitude of the problem in the UK, where children on Free School Meals (FSM) are half as likely to achieve the benchmark of 5A\*-C’s at GCSE; with little improvement in this measure over the past 5 years. Indeed, the LSE Growth Commission commented that this represents a ‘waste of human resources on a grand scale’. If this situation were to improve, the productivity of the UK labour force could well be enhanced.

One solution proposed by Professor Cassen was assisting children to learn to read at a younger age, perhaps through better teaching support, phonics, helpful ICT or ‘Reading Recovery’. However, he commented on his disappointment that funding for the latter had been cut by the coalition; perhaps demonstrating an example of short term savings at the expense of long term gains? This could well be the case, given the long term nature of educational policy and the often all too frequent focus on short term election cycles. In addition, Cassen expressed his desire for the teaching of children with dyslexia to be improvedPersonally I feel that this initiative could be significant, given that a culture or expectation of low achievement tends , funnily enough, to lead to low achievement - although Cassen was unclear exactly how teaching could be improved in this area.

School selection was also discussed, with Professor Cassen conveying his view that UK schools suffer from both covert and overt selection. The former, in the way that good state schools help to bid up house prices in the surrounding are thereby making some good state schools accessible only to the affluent. And overt, in the way that some state schools select pupils on their ability to achieve 5A\*-C’s, thus boosting the schools position in the league tables, thereby disadvantaging the already disadvantaged. As a result, Cassen proposed that schools needed to have a fairer intake, although he was unclear about how this ought to be achieved, given his lack of enthusiasm for the lottery system of allocating places. I think Cassen was a little weak in this area as he offered plenty of criticism without many solutions. Personally, I feel that a voucher system for schools could be adopted, potentially leading to increased parental choice and greater competition, although I doubt the political appetite for such a scheme is present.

Cassen also saw teaching as an area where improvement was needed. Indeed, he indicated that more attention needed to be paid to improving teaching than reforming schools. For instance, Cassen argued that initial teacher training needed to be improved, with more focus on including research findings in the classroom and less on school experience. In this area, I think a careful balance needs to struck between teaching experience and theoretical expertise. In addition, Cassen argued that Teach First ought to be expanded and CPD programmes need to be updated. However, on the subject of entry into teaching, Cassen was unsure whether the profession needed to be easier to enter but with longer probation periods, or harder to enter but with shorter probation periods. Indeed, Cassen was particularly unenthusiastic towards letting unqualified teachers teach in the classroom, which , in my opinion, seems bizarre given that many of the best university lecturers have no formal teaching qualifications and that headteachers have rather strong incentives to hire the best teachers. In addition, the requirement of a qualification may act as a significant barrier to entry, perhaps deterring top candidates. However, Cassen was strong on the need to assess teachers, with more focus on classroom observation and student feedback, as well as a better measure of teacher value added. Professor Cassen expressed his tentative support for performance related pay, although acknowledged that its measurement was far from perfect and research on its effectiveness was limited. Conversely, he favoured more support of higher pay for teachers (particularly in maths and science, as well as those teaching in disadvantaged areas) and more rigorous qualifications. I feel that this more incentive based approach could be more effective although I am sceptical , like Cassen, about the accuracy of performance measures. In addition, unions seem hostile to such a scheme, so it may not materialise, although I’m sure Michael Gove will try his best. Finally, Cassen called for the abolition of the league tables – often criticised for the perverse incentives they create, causing teachers to focus on ‘jumping through’ the 5A\* to C hoop, instead of quality teaching – commenting ‘why do you set up a system that makes so many of the population feel bad?’ as well describing their unintended consequences. Here, I feel Cassen is correct to call for the abolition, or at least revision of league tables, having witnessed the adverse incentives they create. However, I strongly disagree that the education system should make everyone feel good. There’s no doubt individuals should be given an opportunity to feel good about their education, by enjoying their studies and working hard, but I believe that if you wish to preserve the value and integrity of qualifications, then inevitably some students will fail and thus be unhappy. Patting every student on the back and telling them they are excellent is no way to educate students or incentivise serious study.

Aside from teaching, Cassen also expressed his views on practical education, arguing that the ‘endless churning’ in vocational policies needed to end and that apprenticeships ought to be extended, given that at the moment, there are 11 applicants for every place. I feel an extension of apprenticeships could be an effective measure to reduce the ‘structural’ level of unemployment in the long run, although this would of course depend on the quality of such programmes. What’s more, some further ‘churn’ may well be required to reform and improve the system, particularly if existing policies are inadequate. Additionally, Professor Cassen expressed his dismay at the removal of the Educational Maintenance Allowance, remarking ‘don’t ask me why’ – which would suggest he views as an important mechanism to expand educational opportunity to the disadvantaged. From my experience, I don’t think EMA was particularly effective, as it often seemed to be used for consumption unrelated to studying and I can think of many examples of fellow students ‘gaming’ the EMA system - although I am weary to draw conclusions from such a small sample. What’s more, Cassen also lamented at the lack of University Technical Colleges, with just 17 in the UK.

On the subject of Special Education Needs, with 1/5 of students being classified in this way, Professor Cassen remarked that they were clearly ‘not so special’. This is clearly a problem, particularly as SEN students fall into the low expectations trap. Cassen argued that the large expenditure in this area yields little outcome. Indeed, arguably this increased expenditure has had the unintended consequence of employing more teaching assistants for SEN pupils, thereby allowing the class teacher to focus more on the non-SEN students - perhaps an example of government failure and misallocation of resources?

Professor Cassen also argued that more attention needs to be paid on early years learning and parenting. Indeed, Cassen mentioned the ‘Heckman Curve’ which shows that the earlier you intervene, the higher the return. This could perhaps be an area for increased expenditure, although short political cycles help to discourage such activity. In addition, he expressed his disappointment at cuts in government funding on Sure Start and said that greater links need to develop between schools and parents, describing such links as a ‘vital’ way to overcome social disadvantage.

Free schools were also discussed, with Professor Cassen expressing his strong personal opposition, arguing that they were an expensive way to produce places whilst at the same time, reducing funding available for state schools. He was also critical of the fact that free schools do not have to follow the national curriculum as well the potential for pupil segregation based on faith. Personally, I think increased parental control and greater freedom in schools is likely to be beneficial; after all, it seems logical to assume that parents pursue their children interests more vigorously than a group of government officials in Whitehall. What’s more, Cassen voiced his frustration at what he sees as a lack of evidence based policy from the coalition government, with one particular education minister arguably suffering from a severe degree of ‘cognitive capture’ and confirmation bias– although Professor Cassen did not use these exact words. Again, political incentives seem to be causing adverse consequences to children's education; perhaps an argument for greater parental control?

To conclude, Professor Cassen’s talk was deeply insightful and intellectually stimulating. Although I by no means agree with everything he said, it was an honour to host such a great speaker and the Economist’s Society would like to thank him for his time and expertise.