

Book Review

Wilkinson, R., & Pickett, K. (2009). *The Spirit Level: Why More Equal Societies Almost Always Do Better*. London: Allen Lane.

The Spirit Level provides a compelling and timely argument for creating more equal societies. It comes at a time when questions and concerns in education regarding equality come second to questions and concerns about the economy. The book was co-authored by Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett. Wilkinson is a social epidemiologist who has been working in the field for over thirty years. He is an expert in both economics and epidemiology. His work has focused largely on social class and health, and the relationship between the two. Pickett is an expert in physical anthropology, nutritional sciences, and epidemiology. Wilkinson and Pickett cofounded an organization called the Equity Trust in 2009 to circulate the research findings presented in their book, *The Spirit Level*. The book is particularly relevant for people in the field of education. Among other things, it will shed light on the current debate over how much schools can and should do to create more equal societies. It helps illustrate how and why equality is a concern for everyone.

PURPOSE AND ARGUMENT

Wilkinson and Pickett wrote the book to disseminate their research findings and convince skeptics about the necessity and benefits of creating more equal societies. Written in very accessible language, the book provides evidence that supports the argument that unequal societies are plagued with more problems than equal societies. These problems include higher rates of imprisonment, teen pregnancy, birth and death rates, and mental illness.

The authors point out that the problems unequal societies face are not confined to people experiencing poverty and misfortune; rather, they affect people in all levels of society. The authors dispel the myth that greater equality is only beneficial for those at the bottom of the social hierarchy. They argue that everyone benefits from greater equality, in terms of their social lives and their mental and physical health. The authors also argue that equal societies would be beneficial to the environment. For example,

they state that citizens in a more equal world would consume fewer natural resources and create less harmful emissions.

The authors believe that the creation of such a society is only possible when everyone supports the idea. Part of the problem with getting people to buy into the idea of creating more equal societies is in illustrating how everyone will benefit. Through the use of compelling evidence, Wilkinson and Pickett attempt to change the way people think about the problems society faces and the possible solutions. They contend that most people support creating greater equity and decreasing the problems societies face; they merely disagree on the manner in which it should be created. The aim Wilkinson and Pickett have for the book is to help mobilize society toward a common goal of creating greater equality.

ORGANIZATION AND STYLE

The book is very well organized. There are three sections to the book. The first section, comprised of three chapters, outlines the main arguments. The first argument, presented in chapter 1, is that many societal problems result from inequality, and that while economic growth and technological advancements have done everything they can to improve social life and personal health, it is up to human beings to do the rest. The argument presented in chapter 2 is that what matters in terms of inequality is where we stand in relation to other people in our society. The greater the difference in terms of earnings and material possessions, the greater the number of problems a society will have. Chapter 3 states that the problem with inequality is that it divides people as human beings and affects mental well-being. In this chapter the authors discuss how individual sensitivity in unequal societies leads to things like higher levels of anxiety, shame, and violence. Essentially, inequality creates problems because people care what other people think about them, and having less than other people or being viewed as less valuable or having less status makes people feel badly about themselves. Material and income differences also lead people to distance themselves from others, making it easier to cause harm to people viewed as different.

The second section of the book addresses the costs of inequality. It is comprised of nine chapters, each focusing on a different area. The costs addressed include: community life and social relations, mental health and drug use, physical health and life expectancy, obesity, educational performance, teenage births, violence, imprisonment, and lack of social mobility. The third section of the book focuses on solutions, looking at how to create a better or more equal society. There are four chapters in this section. In chapter 13, the authors discuss dysfunctional societies, reinforcing the arguments of the previous nine chapters regarding why and how unequal societies are dysfunctional. The authors argue that they are able to claim

both correlation and causation between societal inequalities and the problems because of their predictable relationship and the number of studies that support their theory.

In chapter 14, the authors describe the roots of society, looking at more primitive social relations as well as the behavior of primates, to which humans are closely related, to discuss whether or not greater equality is actually attainable. Humans are described as “a species that thrives on friendship and enjoys co-operation” that will experience a lot of social pain from living in such an inequitable society (p. 213). Chapter 15 includes a discussion on why equality and sustainability are, and should be, intimately related. The authors contend that technological advancements should not be seen as the answer to environmental problems because when machines that are more efficient and cheaper to run are created, people will find other ways to consume. Solutions such as creating a steady state economy are proposed. This form of economy is not fully explained by the authors, although they do point out its value in decreasing inequality and consumption.

In chapter 16, the final chapter, the authors discuss why the current economic climate and makeup is not conducive to creating greater equality. Solutions such as creating more employee-owned companies and reducing wage disparities are discussed. However, the main purpose of the chapter is to make the point that the first thing that needs to be accomplished is creating a culture of acceptance about the notion that more equitable societies are better for everyone. The authors discuss how the biggest problem will be getting people to join the movement. But once that happens there are many ways of working toward equality. One of the strongest arguments provided in this chapter is that “what we need is not one big revolution but a continuous stream of small changes in a consistent direction” (p. 232). One of the ways of achieving this is for governments to consistently implement equality-related policies. The authors also make the point, though, that all of the efforts of one government to reduce inequality could easily and quickly be undone by a succeeding government with opposing views.

EVIDENCE AND DISCUSSION

The authors use evidence from multiple sources to make their arguments. Most of the sources are highly credible and accessible, including reports conducted by the United Nations and national research groups from the countries discussed. The authors also cite some of their own research. The sources were presented in a straightforward manner to illustrate their legitimacy. In most cases, readers will not need to flip to the back of the book to check the reference; the authors make it clear whose work they use to illustrate their arguments.

Throughout the book the authors use charts to illustrate the legitimacy of their arguments. In doing so, they rely on data gathered from various studies to show the relationships they are demonstrating, providing strength to their arguments. While they use data from their own research, they also employ many other sources. The authors also include an introduction to their charts at the beginning of the book, explaining how to read them. The ease with which the charts can be read and understood adds to the credibility of the evidence and the strength of the arguments.

The authors make a strong case for the fact that inequality is related to social, physical, and mental problems. However, they are unable to demonstrate a causal relationship. It is not clear if inequality causes problems, even though it is obvious that as inequality increases so do social problems. Other evidence confirms the latter relationship. The authors cite the example of a psychiatrist who has interviewed numerous violent offenders about why they committed violence against others. This psychologist has found that violent offenders claimed they were reacting to feeling shamed, or having their pride or integrity threatened (p. 133). The authors also point to findings of evolutionary psychologists that “young men have strong incentives to achieve and maintain as high a social status as they can” (p. 134). They state that when inequality increases, the stakes for maintaining high status also increase. They feel that this explains men’s violent reactions to having their status threatened. However, this does not demonstrate that inequality has caused the problem of violence.

Wilkinson and Pickett state that “psychologists and others have always told us that the nature of a child’s early life affects the development of their personality and the kind of people they will grow up to be in adult life” (p. 207). It would be interesting to know the statistics on how many children in unequal societies have either little or negative influences on their personality in early life. Perhaps the reason that social problems such as violence and anxiety are higher in unequal societies is because children in these societies tend to have less positive influences in their early years. This would mean that the solution to these problems would not necessarily be reducing inequality but ensuring children have positive role models in their early years. This is not meant to take away from the value of reducing inequality; it just shows that the equality solution might not solve all the problems unequal societies face. But perhaps reducing inequality is a worthy enough goal in its own right, without needing to provide evidence that it will solve the problems of society. Reducing inequality and creating societies where people focus less on material possessions and status is a means to create more humane societies, and a more equitable and caring world. The point is that correlations do matter; however, in order to create real change we need to understand more about the actual causal relationships between things like inequity and health.

Throughout the book it appears that Wilkinson and Pickett are trying to find concrete reasons and sound evidence that equality will be better for people and the earth on which they live, because they feel they need to do this in order to get people mobilized for the cause. In chapter 16, the authors discuss how unsustainability and inequality go hand in hand and that creating greater equality will also create greater environmental sustainability. While the arguments are compelling, they also display weaknesses. One example is an argument for fairly reducing carbon emissions. The authors propose a program in which each citizen would be given a certain allocation of fuel; they would get a card to use to pay for fuel and flights. People who use less fuel could sell their unused portion to those with the money and willingness to buy it. The authors state that this would allow high consumers to compensate low consumers, and “income would be redistributed to the poor” (p. 219). But it is highly unlikely that this would happen in the current unequal world. It would likely create greater inequality because poorer people would be pressured to make money by selling their fuel to the wealthy, as it would be a quick and easy way to make money. Selling fuel allocations for cash could become a societal norm for poorer people, just as selling food stamps to raise money has become quite common in the United States (Kempson, Palmer Keenan, Sadani, & Adler, 2003). Selling fuel allocations to increase income would result in greater inequity because the wealthy would be able to travel more than the poor. This would be true for traveling for leisure and for work. Wealthy people would be able to commute to jobs paying more money, while the poor would be stuck working at whatever jobs they could find within close range of their homes, or on transit routes. Rather than distinguishing between status groups based on things like purses and jewellery, the ability to travel for both leisure and work would become a greater signifier of wealth and status.

Despite their inability to demonstrate a causal relationship between equality and social problems, the value of Wilkinson and Pickett’s goal is hard to argue with. The idea of creating a more equitable and sustainable world for the betterment of society is one worth fighting for, and an idea that is particularly important for educators to consider. Yet, as Wilkinson and Pickett illustrate, regardless of the validity and value of their argument for creating more equitable societies, there is great deal of inequity in the contemporary world. Their evidence may be relatively new, but the argument and cause are not. Inequality has existed for centuries, and it is easily detected in many educational settings. As educators and educational leaders, we obviously need to be compelled through books such as this to work toward greater equality, and to understand how serious the consequences of inequality are for everyone, not just those who are less fortunate. In these tumultuous economic times in particular it is imperative that we

remain focused on what we can contribute to the creation of more equal and equitable societies through educational policies and practice.

Stephanie Tuters
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education,
University of Toronto,
Canada

REFERENCE

- Kempson, K., Palmer Keenan, D., Sadani, P. S., & Adler, A. (2003). Maintaining food sufficiency: Coping strategies identified by limited-resource individuals versus nutrition educators. *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior*, 35, 179–188.

Copyright of Leadership & Policy in Schools is the property of Routledge and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.