In a recent article in The Guardian, Polly Toynbee responded to Dominic Cummings’ claim that genetics plays an important role in a child’s performance. She argued instead that socio-economic inequality is a greater factor. Toynbee proceeds to attack Michael Gove’s leading advisor, claiming that his extrapolations did not take into consideration the complexities of both nature and nurture. However, his arguments and propositions in his 237-page paper are guilty of a lot more; susceptible to subjectivity, lack of feasibility, and the worst – dangerously crippling levels of pessimism.

Taking the statistics of behavioural geneticist Robert Plomin’s to conjecture that the largest factor influencing performance within schools is genetics is contentious. The questionable conflation of test scores and performance is one thing, but then there’s the need to look at the feasibility of taking genetics itself into consideration.

Criticising the political spectrum for having “such strong resistance [...] to accepting scientific evidence on genetics”, and writing off arguments about social mobility “at best misleading and often worthless”, Cummings doesn’t take into account how difficult it is to allow a predetermined factor such as genetics to inform educational policy. No doubt genetics, to some (still hotly debated) extent, is a factor that influences performance. But because socio-economic equity is more easily manipulated as a social factor, debates regarding ways to improve educational policy would naturally revolve around factors that can be changed, as opposed to accommodate factors that cannot.

Trying to accommodate genetics into policy is a slippery slope. This can be seen in Singapore where the Social Development Unit sponsors slightly-too-intimate activities in universities that encourages graduates to get married – through orientation games, no less. The artificiality of which is certainly cringeworthy and its actual effectiveness, dubious.

Cummings then proceeds to remark that many attending university in the UK and the USA are “wasting their time, and their own and taxpayers’ money, and would be better off in jobs or work-based training”. Apart from the blatant elitism, the statistics he cites in the footnote to justify this bold statement details how a large number of US undergraduates are studying only slightly more than 12 hours a week, with few courses requiring more than 40-pages of reading a week or writing as much as 20 pages a semester.

In this, Cummings not only conflates quantity and quality, but also fails to recognise how subjective the value of a university education is, especially when he ignores the intellectual value of courses where the pragmatic value might not be immediately obvious.

However, the most glaring disregard for the subjectivity in Cummings’ paper is when he suggested that although head teachers need to leave room for “talented people to experiment”, there is still a need for “schools in chains that spread proven approaches (and ‘90 per cent solutions’) without relying on innovation, inspiration, and talent”. Claiming that having “brilliant” teachers is not a practical solution (as he pessimistically declares that “real talent is rare, mediocrity ubiquitous”), he doesn’t leave the readers with indication of what constitutes “real talent” or a “brilliant” teacher.
And as anyone who has a favourite teacher can testify, good teaching is ambiguous and subject to how students learn, which in itself is specific to each student.

As such, teaching, like any profession that frequently interacts with people, requires adaptability to cater to the students to the best of their abilities. To assert that there can ever be such a thing as “proven approaches” or worse – “90 per cent solutions” (which even Cummings himself put in inverted commas) – is not just arrogant, but fallacious to assume that the complexities of different learning needs can be so easily catered for.

Too much emphasis is placed on finding ways to accommodate status quo in the form of genetic predetermination or the current standard of teaching rather than trying to work with what can be changed. Aside from gross inequality, this is the problem with this type of elitism, whether it be genetic or qualifying as a “brilliant” teacher in Cummings’ eyes.

Circumventing the issue by passively accepting that some students have the genetic odds stacked against them or that the majority of teachers are “roughly averagely talented people” is not a solution, it becomes an excuse for simply giving up.