
Post-16 education, regional inequality and democracy

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Eton College's move to open three small Sixth Form Colleges, of just over 200 students each, in Middlesbrough, Oldham and Dudley, is part of a broader initiative driven by the Government's 'Levelling Up' agenda. As *FE Week* reported, 55 areas of the country with 'weak' school outcomes, referred to in the policy documentation as 'education investment areas', or 'cold spots', have been designated, and will be prioritised for the establishment of 'specialist' Sixth Form free schools (Camden, 2022).

What the Government refers to as 'cold spots' are in fact structurally disadvantaged peripheries of the dominant neoliberal model of capital accumulation in Britain. The economic peripheralisation that these regions have had imposed upon them has wrought dire social consequences. The North-East Child Poverty Commission, drawing on Household Below Average Income figures, shows that Middlesbrough constituency had a child poverty rate of 46 per cent in 2019-20, up from 32 per cent in 2014-15. For the North East as a whole the figure stands at 37 per cent, the second highest region and the one which has seen the biggest increase since 2014-15. Child poverty data for Oldham hardly looks better. Here, the End Child Poverty coalition suggest 24,500 children live in poverty. And Dudley fares little better. Here, 35.6 per cent of children - around 22,100 - live in poverty.

One way of reading Eton's efforts to expand into these peripheralised regions is as an extension of a longer-term process, although with significantly increased state support, whereby the dispersal of elite educational institutions is seen as a panacea for educational disadvantage. The reality, of course, is that such an approach only serves to create and reinforce 'a powerful educational infrastructure for the upper and middle classes' (Gamsu, 2016).

Another way of reading what's happening is that Eton and other elite private schools are looking for ways to respond to the increasing popularity of calls for their abolition or integration into the state system. Buttressed by the publication of mainstream books critical of the private education sector, such as Robert Verkaik's *Posh Boys* and Francis Green and David Kynaston's *Engines of Privilege*, as well as recent research from the Common Wealth think tank identifying the staggering funding gaps between private and state schools (Gamsu, 2021), social movements have advanced strong arguments against private education that have begun to gain traction. For instance, the Labour Against Private Schools group's *Abolish Eton* campaign has put private school integration firmly onto the mainstream agenda. Coupled with the efforts of others, including Comprehensive Future, these campaigns marked a real challenge to the place of privatised elite education institutions, with loss of charitable status only one of the policies still on the agenda. Against such a charged political backdrop, private schools are looking for appeasement strategies to ease the concerns of the political elite - many of whom are their former students - as well as to placate a restive populace with good-news headlines. What better way to do this than to announce the sponsorship of new institutions in economically and socially deprived regions?

Of course, the background context here is the stark regional divide between London and the South-East of England and the rest of the country when it comes to private school participation. In regional contexts where fee-paying schools risk being unviable, government policy has repeatedly been used to subsidise educational institutions rooted in private ownership and elitism in regions where conditions are otherwise unfavourable to them (Gamsu, 2020).

Contemporary debate on the UK education system has long neglected the fact that post-16 is effectively the only phase where society retains academic selection within the 11-18 state education system, via mechanisms such as entry grade criteria for courses and colleges. Some institutions, such as Harris Westminster Sixth Form, another proposed partner for the Government's new 'specialist' institutions, use an entrance exam as part of their system of offering places. This system of academic selection has been justified by the Principal of the institution because it enables them to 'provide for those students that might not be challenged in a group where everything was aimed at the middle' (Camden, 2022). But what needs to be recognised is that all of society loses out when we academically select by attainment and create spaces and institutions designed for a supposed 'elite', separate and apart from the spaces and institutions inhabited by the rest of us.

What is the current state of play for those studying and working in post-16 education outside of and beyond elite institutions? 'The education England offers 16-19-year-olds is uniquely narrow and under-resourced', Eddie Playfair has written (Playfair, 2020: 47). He continues:

It has no agreed common content or sense of overarching purpose beyond delivering the bare requirements for progression to employment or higher education. Funding is so squeezed that colleges struggle to ensure even the minimum level of provision and have little margin to provide the personal and social development, broadening and enhancement opportunities that more privileged students take for granted. Instead, our students are expected to compete in a zero-sum game of adding value and achieving upward social-mobility based on minimal investment' (Playfair, 2020: 47).

Encouraging private schools like Eton to work with academy trusts in order to establish new institutions catering to a couple of hundred students does nothing to address these extant structural issues. It does nothing to improve the lives and experiences of the thousands of young people, nor the underpaid, under-resourced and overworked staff, in the rest of the country's post-16 education institutions. Indeed, by selecting out a high-attaining cohort it potentially diminishes the educational and classroom experiences in other institutions.

Solving regional inequality cannot be based on a system of privatised, selective education that will amplify local inequalities and ignore already-existing local providers and their expertise/experiences. What, then, might a reform agenda for post-16 education fit for the task of tackling regional

inequality actually look like? We suggest the following as a starting point for discussion:

- Significant increases in funding to build a properly resourced, comprehensive post-16 educational infrastructure;
- Broad democratic oversight of regional post-16 education coordinated by well-resourced local authorities;
- Coordination of post-16 educational planning to receive input from regional councils of experts, drawn from existing post-16 providers, trade unions, employers and community groups / social projects;
- Increased staffing in post-16 institutions to enable teachers and instructors more time for planning, for engaging with collaborative projects and for meaningful community engagement;
- Much closer links between the different post-16 institutions in an area, fostering a spirit of collaborative working between staff and students in diverse contexts;
- Fully comprehensive entry for post-16 qualifications;
- Colleges to be placed at the heart of a new lifelong learning model;
- Abolition of league tables based on exam results, which currently drive too many institutions to prioritise exam results over and above more holistic education within communities, and encourage institutions to compete rather than collaborate;
- Replacement of hierarchical models of post-16 educational management with cooperative and collaborative collectives, enabling staff, students and the wider community to have a democratic input into the culture and learning within an institution;
- Reform of GCSE assessment and to post-16 qualifications to enable students to pursue a broader range of academic/vocational courses that suit their needs and those of their communities.

'Ultimately the choices we make about sixth form education are choices about what form we would like democracy to take', William Reid and Jane Filby wrote in *The Sixth: An Essay in Education and Democracy* (Reid and Filby, 1982: 246). Will we, they asked, build a post-16 educational infrastructure that leaves 'effective power in the hands of an elite marked off from the rest of society?' Or will we establish a system that aims for 'the incorporation of as many of the population as possible into shared conceptions of democratic citizenship?' The decision to allow Eton to open highly selective institutions in the Midlands and North shows that elitism remains the order of the day in educational policy-making. We must resist this expansion of the remit of private providers, and

work to build a post-16 educational infrastructure that lives up to, and exceeds, Reid and Filby's democratic ideals.

References

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