
The North's educational class divide

Stephen Lambert *argues we must overcome it to give every child a fighting chance.*

Working-class school students in the North are under-achieving. The region's schools and colleges need more investment to give all young people a chance.

Huddersfield University educationalist Ron Thompson points out that social class or socio-economic status not ethnicity, gender or sexual orientation determines how well a child does at school. The more affluent the family, the more successful s/he will be, and the greater his/her educational 'life chances'. Keir Starmer rightly notes that a responsible government's defining mission must be to eliminate these disparities and ensure every young person can fulfil his/her potential. Labour is committed to breaking the 'class ceiling' when in government.

The North-East Poverty Commission has observed that working-class kids / those from poorer neighbourhoods achieve weaker exam results than their better-off peers. Northern Powerhouse Partnership research shows qualification levels are lower in our region than nationally. Over a quarter of our population have no vocational or academic qualifications. Less than a quarter possess a level 4 technical qualification. One third of all pupils, often dubbed the 'forgotten third', fail to get a level 4 pass in GCSE Maths and English.

Although most 16 to 19 year olds across the North-East are in full-time education, apprenticeship or traineeship, a significant minority are still classed as NEET. According to Newcastle City Council's Inclusive Economic Strategy, the city has one of the

UK's highest rates of youth unemployment/NEET.

There was a sharp increase in 16 to 24 year olds who were either 'officially unemployed or classified as NEET' in October-December 2022. One in eight young people are NEET. Disadvantaged electoral wards with the highest NEET figures are Elswick, Walker, Benwell/Scotswood and Newbiggin Hall estate. Nationally the total of NEETs has risen to 794,000 from 724,000, the vast majority from disadvantaged working-class backgrounds.

That's why Newcastle Council have set up a Task and Finish Group to explore ways of supporting young people across the city into education, work and training.

England's most disadvantaged students have fallen further behind their peers. They are on average over two-thirds behind non-disadvantaged students by 16. The worst hit North-East areas are Tyneside, urban coastal Northumberland communities and 'de-industrialised' mining towns of County Durham. Sociologist Diane Reay notes: 'There remains an entrenched and unbroken correlation between class and educational success'.

For several social scientists the chief factors affecting working-class achievement are relative deprivation and material circumstances. In the Newcastle Central parliamentary constituency, over 45 per cent of youngsters experience child poverty. Child poverty has increased both in the North and Midlands. Middlesbrough's child poverty rate is 41 per cent, with a North-East regional rate of 24 per cent.

There's an attainment gap between pupils who receive free school meals (FSM) and those that don't. 15 per cent of boys on FSMs do not achieve five 'good' GCSEs. Problems at home, such as low incomes and 'faulty socialisation', are partly to blame. Reay writes: 'We need to look beyond the school gates. There's only so much that educational institutions can do to improve class inequalities, given the economic and social context in which they operate'.

The stark reality is that too many disadvantaged youngsters living in inner-city wards and outer council estates are trapped in cold, food-insecure and over-crowded housing where there's little space to do homework. Many lack personal computers or laptops - a 'digital divide' made worse by the COVID-19 lockdown.

Political scientist Matthew Goodwin blames 'cultural factors'. In many workless households there's a lack of parental interest, partly reflecting parents' own 'bad' experiences of formal schooling, with an ingrained anti-learning culture. This is breaking down amongst stable working-class communities but not in the 'forgotten' de-industrialised places in County Durham, Teesside

and West Cumbria. In contrast, as educationalist Robin Simmons notes, middle-class professional parents possess the economic and 'social and cultural capital' to get their children into Russell Group universities and well-paid jobs.

Scholars like Stephen Pollard and Lord Adonis put the class attainment gap down to quality of schooling. Many Northeast schools and colleges are doing their best in challenging circumstances, with able and dedicated teachers and an emphasis on inclusive learning. But a fifth of students are in secondary schools rated less than 'good' by Ofsted. Government's free market measures like Free Schools and Academies have had little impact. Even former Ofsted boss Michael Wilshaw conceded that academisation had failed to transform the 'miserable standards' being achieved in the North.

Good schooling can't eradicate inequality, but can help to mitigate it. There's evidence to support Lord Blunkett's view that an 'outstanding or good school' in a deprived neighbourhood can improve students' life-expectations. Relevant factors include: teachers who are well prepared for lessons; smaller class sizes; teachers who set high standards of behaviour; teachers who praise rather than blame; teachers who respect students and show genuine interest in their development; above all, heads and college principals with an ethos which promotes self-confidence and self-esteem amongst all learners.

If we're serious about closing the class and geographical educational divide, national government and a prospective North-East combined authority must adopt policies to break down barriers to opportunity at every stage for every pupil, with high-quality childcare and schools in every community.

This means a modern childcare system with breakfast clubs in every primary school. There also needs to be a world-class teacher in every classroom, achievable by recruiting 6,500 new staff funded by stopping private schools' tax breaks, and a wider curriculum fostering creativity and oral and digital skills that prepare young adults for work and life, alongside expanded apprenticeships and skills training.

The establishment of a regional 'Learning Challenge' based on the London model is a priority, plus an assault on home, spatial and neighbourhood-based inequities - in short, making 'levelling up' and a 'Northern Powerhouse' a reality.

Contrary to popular belief, class distinctions still affect how well children and young people do at school or college, and the future before them.