

Bridging the educational class divide

Patrick Ainley takes up some points made by Stephen Lambert in his PSE 113 article, 'The North's educational class divide'*

*Available at: <http://post16educator.org.uk/resources/archive/113/PSE-113-Lambert-only.pdf>

Stephen Lambert is a Newcastle councillor who knows his city well. In PSE 113 he draws on reports, surveys and other sources to show that social class, not ethnicity, gender or sexual orientation, determines how badly working-class kids do at school and college in the North East compared to those from more affluent families. He follows Keir Starmer's commitment for a future Labour government to eliminate these disparities supported by the City Council's Inclusive Economic Strategy to level up in a Northern Powerhouse. To this end, 'Labour will fight the next general election with every policy judged by its contribution to growth and productivity' (Starmer 25/7/22).

For education at all levels this spells targets for more training and qualifications for anticipated employment. This can be called a techno-centric approach, as opposed to failed free-market ones. It is also top-down as opposed to bottom-up, not recognising the main challenge is social not economic with the danger that commitment to economic growth before all else means raising taxes and savings through more austerity. Instead, Labour Chancellor Reeves would have to draw on other sources of funding, like corporate taxes as well as more QE but also taxing the lifestyles and incomes of the very rich.

Meaningless targets, such as 'world-class teachers in every classroom' so that 'each student realises their full potential' only become hoops to make teachers train their students to jump through. When they fail, educationists like Matthew Goodwin - who Stephen refers to - blame working-class 'anti-learning culture', without understanding that competitive examination in an academic National Curriculum, whilst it appears open to all, is not a neutral measure of

'intelligence' but actually tests levels of literacy more or less expensively acquired by parental investment in private tuition and schooling.

Reform of A-levels - not further differentiating them with T-levels but going back to Tomlinson to mix arts, sciences and technical subjects - would be a first step for subject associations and other professional bodies. The need for GCSEs is also already widely questioned as is the role of Ofsted in school management. More questions should be asked about incipient privatisation through academy chains, returning such 'free' and 'independent state schools' to local authorities plus uncompromising inclusion of the private sector.

Teacher unions largely missed the chance for joint meetings of school, college and university staffs when they were all on strike together, indicating the greatest obstacle to cooperation across subjects, sectors and institutions lies in characteristic silo-ism. In particular, parents and students need recognition as the foundation for what has been called:

adaptive reuse in which progress involves multiple small transitions moving us beyond the limited vision of our earlier constructions . . . The principle is that what already exists provides the basis from which we must start and what we should adapt, extend and improve. Stopping doing things that are damaging and dysfunctional is often a very good first step. (Calafati et al *When Nothing Works. From Cost of Living to Foundational Liveability* Manchester UP 2023, pp. 234-235).

