

Why class still influences educational achievement

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Latest figures indicate that youngsters from private schools, mostly from upper-middle-class backgrounds, still get the top grades at GCSE, compared to pupils from state schools. Although 60 per cent of young people educated in comprehensive schools are doing better than ten years ago, working-class youngsters, both in Newcastle and elsewhere in the North-East, are lagging behind.

It's becoming blatantly clear that socio-economic status, and not gender or ethnicity, is the key factor as to whether a child does well or badly at school across the North-East. The higher the class (measured by wealth or job) of parents, the more successful a youngster will be in schooling. Lower working-class children, living in disadvantaged neighbourhoods, compared to middle-class youngsters of the same ability, generally get poorer exam results according to the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission (October 2014) report. For instance, around 90 per cent of young people living in the leafy suburbs of Gosforth, Jesmond, High Heaton or Darras Hall get five or more GCSE results at A* - C, compared to less than a third from lower-class backgrounds, especially in Newcastle's inner-city areas or outer council estates.

Strikingly, less than half of young people from unskilled manual families stay on in post-16 full-time education, compared to about nine in ten from managerial or professional households across Newcastle. 18 per cent of 16 year-olds in the city are not in education, employment or training, with over 28 per cent of this group living in the five 'priority wards': Kenton, Benwell and Scotswood, Elswick, Westgate and Walker.

So how can we explain what's going on, and what can we do about it? Some critics put it down to the quality of schooling. True, Newcastle City Council and the Government were right in their policy decisions to close down Blakelaw School and Westgate College in the late 90s, on the grounds of falling standards and bad truancy rates. In the case of Westgate College, in the city's west end, the pass rate of A-C stood at 9 per cent in 1999! Quite frankly, an absolute disgrace, largely attributable to weak leadership and mediocre teaching in some subjects – though in all fairness there were examples of 'good practice', especially in history and other humanities subjects. Tony Blair's controversial decision to convert the school to academy

status, set up in Scotswood, was one step in the right direction.

However, there is substantial evidence, from experts, that a 'good school' in a disadvantaged neighbourhood can make a difference. According to top educationalists Mortimer and Rutter, good schools can make a difference to the 'life chances' of all pupils. For example: teachers who are well prepared for lessons; teachers who have high expectations; teachers who set high examples of behaviour and place emphasis on praise rather than blame; teachers who treat pupils with respect and show an interest in their development. But above all, there is an expectation, set by competent, high-striving head-teachers, who are committed to a strong achieving ethos, which promotes self-confidence and self-esteem amongst students. Take St Mary's Comprehensive school in Longbenton, Newcastle / North Tyneside, with a mixed intake both social class-wise and culturally, where an exceptional head-teacher transformed a 'failing school' into a successful one. Last year the school was awarded a Grade One (outstanding) by Ofsted. Twenty years ago it was regarded as a 'sink school', due to weak leadership and management, and demoralised teachers who too often labelled pupils as under-performers, leading into a self-fulfilling prophecy, where the youngsters believed they were failures. Most left to go into low paid, low-status jobs or, worse, the dole queue, with a deep legacy of hatred of formal education. What a waste of working-class talent!

Despite these accomplishments, schools, however good or outstanding, can't compensate for the inequalities in the real world.

One of the key factors for working-class under-achievement is poverty and material circumstances. In Newcastle, over 32 per cent of youngsters experience child poverty, an increase from two years ago, which has clearly had an impact on their educational success or failure. According to the report *Children's Life Chances*, produced by the North East Child Poverty Commission in November 2014, there is an attainment gap between pupils who receive free school meals and those that don't. 15 per cent of boys receiving free school meals didn't get five GCSEs. Likewise, according to the Newcastle Education Commission in 2005, problems at home, such as low incomes or poor parenting, are more to blame than schools for

poor exam results. The reality is that too many poor youngsters living in our inner cities and outer-council estates are living in overcrowded conditions, where there is little space to do homework and many lack computers – what the experts call ‘digital exclusion’. Sadly, in some workless households there is a lack of parental interest, and a deeply ingrained ‘anti-learning culture’, though amongst more aspirational working-class communities both white and BME this appears to be slowly breaking down, both across Newcastle and in urban areas across the region. Of course, the fact remains that middle-class parents possess the ‘cultural capital’ to get their kids onto the educational and career ladder. Many can afford to follow unpaid internships in attractive careers such as journalism or public relations.

Locally, Newcastle City Council has recently established the Newcastle Learning Challenge, made up of head-teachers, school governors, the universities, business, the ‘third sector’ and Newcastle College. This consortium is collating empirical evidence from a wide range of expertise and experience, with a report due out at the end of the summer capturing some emerging thinking about how the ‘attainment gap’ can be addressed here.

To reverse this trend on a national level, central government needs to abide by the Child Poverty Act, brought in by the Labour government in 2010 to minimise inequalities and eradicate child poverty by 2020, as recommended by the Milburn Report this year. Educational Achievement Zones, committed to compensatory schooling, including breakfast clubs in poor neighbourhoods, introduced by the last Labour government, need to be restored, and Sure Start programmes aimed at deprived pre-school children under five and their parents need to be safeguarded. Most schools and colleges in Newcastle are doing their best, with able and dedicated teachers, with an emphasis on inclusive learning, but they can’t compensate for the iniquities of a class-divided city and region. If we’re serious about raising the attainment levels of disadvantaged youngsters, central government must adopt public policies to bring about a fairer and more equal society.

Contrary to popular belief, then, social class hasn’t vanished. It’s alive and well. As Christine Skelton, in her book *Schooling the Boys*, says, it is social class, not gender, that affects overall educational performance, both in Newcastle and elsewhere in the North East.

