

Underachievement in education by white working class children

First Education Select Committee Report (June 2014)

<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201415/cmselect/cmeduc/142/14202.htm>

The Education Select Committee has made a good start on evaluating the evidence of white working class underachievement in education and has suggested a range of school level actions that could help to close the gap. In this first report, the Committee also make a series of positive policy recommendations that should help schools to do their part in tackling the issue. However, the Committee is circumspect in its assessment of the part that careers and work-related learning activities could play in raising achievement and helping white working class young people to create satisfying careers for themselves. In part, this is because the committee wants to allow time for this April's statutory guidance to take effect and it is also waiting for the publication of the Sutton Trust report into the effectiveness of careers education and guidance. It may also reflect the fact that this time the Committee did not collect expert evidence from individuals or organisations involved in careers guidance research or practice. There is still time for the Committee to put this right! This cegnet briefing summarises the report and the factors that may contribute to white working class underachievement. It also highlights what the Report does say about the possible role of careers and work-related learning in helping to tackle the issue.

Summary of the report

- White working class underachievement in education is real and persistent
- The problem is as much about white working class girls as it is about white working class boys
- White working class children eligible for free school meals are consistently the lowest performing group in the country
- The gap exists at age 5 and widens as children get older
- The causes of white working class underachievement include matters in home life, school practices and wider social policies. School improvement alone will not close the gap. However, the Select Committee focused on how schools can and do make a dramatic difference to the educational outcomes of white working class children eligible for free school meals (FSM). (Studies suggest that school-level factors account for 14-20 per cent of variability in a pupil's achievement)

- Their policy recommendations focused on:
 - Schools working together on local solutions (such as providing space to complete homework) rather than setting up a national or sub-regional strategy
 - Using Pupil Premium and the Progress 8 metric to benefit this group and asking Ofsted to produce an annual report on progress
 - Encouraging schools to use the Education Endowment Foundation teaching and learning toolkit to help them choose the most appropriate kinds of interventions (<http://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/toolkit/>)
 - Asking Ofsted to update their 2008 good practice report (<http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/white-boys-low-income-backgrounds-good-practice-schools>)
 - Strengthening parental engagement in the Early Years
 - Maintaining the focus on getting the best teachers into the areas that need them the most.

Factors that may contribute to white working class underachievement

Family and home factors

- Impact of social and economic deprivation
- Problems with students' aspirations. This is a contested area with some identifying low aspirations as the problem while others argue that lack of aspirational capability is the real issue
- Poverty of expectation
- Lack of social and cultural capital
- Failure of parents to engage with education
- Poor parenting skills
- Failure of parents to develop their children's language skills

School factors

- Unresponsive curriculum – not attuned to the needs and interests of students
- Unsuitable pedagogy that fails to motivate and inspire
- Failing to crack down on absence
- High rates of fixed term exclusions
- Problems faced by schools in managing the poor behaviour of a minority of disruptive boys (linked to wider white working class concepts of masculinity) which has a negative effect on the achievement of all students)
- A middle-class ethos that does not validate working-classness

Wider social issues and other factors

- Not enough white working class parents use DfE data to choose the best schools for their children
- Immigrant families place a higher value on education
- Loss of traditional white working class jobs in the economy with some regions more badly affected than others
- Research suggests that 50% of the variation in children's individual educational achievement were the result of genetic factors

Implications for careers work in schools

- Schools must recognise that “the nature of the labour market in England has changed and the consequences for young people of low educational achievement are now more dramatic than they may have been in the past”
- Stable, respectable and skilled white working class jobs in the mass industries such as textiles, mining, steel-making, shipbuilding and manufacturing have been largely lost to the economy and replaced by low-skilled service sector jobs
- The Wolf reform of vocational qualifications are expected to have a larger impact on white FSM pupils although Professor Wolf argues that hopefully it is going to be better for them as they will not be allowed to study qualifications that employers do not value
- The Committee is concerned that “a careful balance needs to be struck between ensuring that young people are given access to an academic education while avoiding portraying vocational routes as a second-class option”
- The Committee noted in its 2013 report on Careers Guidance for Young People that the statutory duty for schools to provide work-related learning had been removed in August 2012 and is looking forward to exploring how well the new Statutory Guidance meets the need for guidance on work-related learning
- The Committee is looking forward to receiving the report commissioned by the Sutton Trust on the quantitative evidence for the effect of careers education and guidance, including analysis by social class
- The Committee noted that the consequence of low educational attainment is too often “NEET” status—not in education, employment or training. The Committee cites a report for the Employers Federation that found that positive relationships exist between the number of employer contacts (such as careers talks or work experience) that a young person experiences in school (between the ages of 14 and 19) and their confidence (at 19-24) in progression towards ultimate career goals and the likelihood of whether (at 19-24) they are NEET or non-NEET.

The Report's conclusions

"142. On average, poor white children tend to perform at a much lower level in education than their more affluent peers, and at a lower level than many similarly economically-deprived children of other ethnicities. Meanwhile, the economy has changed in recent decades; while underachievement in education may once have led to a lifetime of employment in traditional routine manual occupations in factories, the consequence now is more likely to be "NEET" status.

"143. This problem must be tackled by ensuring that the best teachers and leaders are incentivised to work in the schools and areas that need them the most, and by providing better advice and guidance to young people. Schools face a battle for resources and talent, and those serving poor white communities need a better chance of winning. Poor white children in rural and coastal areas have been "unseen" for too long; unless such steps are taken the potential of white working class children will be left unlocked, and the effects of the current trend will continue to be felt beyond the school gates. White working class children can achieve in education, and the Government must take these steps to ensure that they do."

Anthony Barnes

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