

# Working-class under-achievement

**Stephen Lambert** *proposes a learning challenge*

It's becoming blatantly clear that social class or socio-economic status and not gender or race determine how well a child does at school. The more affluent the family, measured by wealth or job, the more successful a youngster will be and the greater their 'life-chances'.

The defining mission of any responsible government must be to eliminate these differences and ensure every child in our region has the opportunity to fulfil his or her potential, regardless of family background. The Social Mobility Commission's *State of the Nation* report for 2017 is the latest to observe that working-class kids or those from poorer neighbourhoods achieve weaker exam results than those of their peers from more well-to-do families. Diane Reay in her new book, *Miseducation: Inequality, Education and the Working Classes* (2017) notes: 'There remains an entrenched and unbroken correlation between social class and educational success'. As professor Green, the rapper, observes in his Channel 4 documentary, the white working class are losing out big style.

Strikingly, less than half of young people from unskilled manual families stay on in post-16 full-time education compared to nine in ten from managerial or professional households across the city [ie Newcastle upon Tyne. Ed.]. 21 per cent of 16 to 25 year-olds in our region are NEETs (not in education, employment or training) according to the think-tank Policy North.

And in a report produced by the independent Education Policy Institute, the most disadvantaged pupils in England have fallen further behind their peers, and are on average over two years behind non-disadvantaged pupils by the age of 16. The worst hit areas are in the north of England: Cumbria, Gateshead, Tyneside, Durham and Northumberland coastal towns.

In August 2017 a report by Yorkshire MPs Gloria de Piero and Tracy Brabin highlighted the under-representation of people from working-class backgrounds in the performing arts. The MP David Lammy has recently highlighted the serious under-representation of working-class students at Oxbridge, where more than eight out of ten

undergraduates come from the top social class groupings.

As the educational charity the Sutton Trust points out, although only 7 per cent of British youngsters are privately educated, they constitute 43 per cent of Oxford University's intake and 37 per cent of Cambridge's. Almost half (48 per cent) of Durham University's graduates come from fee-paying independent schools! In the prestigious bistros of Durham city you're more likely to come across a Giles than a Gavin or an Antonia than an Anne.

Class inequality is alive and well, and reproduces itself from one generation to the next. One quarter of MPs, 82 per cent of barristers, 81 per cent of top judges and 52 per cent of national journalists have been to Oxbridge. Meanwhile, only 12 per cent of chief executives, 6 per cent of hospital doctors and 12 per cent of print journalists come from a working-class background.

So how can we explain what's going on, and what can government do about it?

Some experts like Lord Adonis and Stephen Pollard put it down to the quality of schooling. Teacher labelling, negative stereotyping of working-class pupils too often led to the self-fulfilling prophecy where youngsters believed they were 'failures'. Some formed pupil anti-school sub-cultures, which manifested itself in 'laddish' behaviour, as noted by former government minister Steve Byers in 1998. Until the 1990s millions left at 16. Some did apprenticeships. Others joined the local FE college, while a minority ended up in badly paid, low status work with the badge of failure hanging round their necks.

There is substantial evidence to support Tony Blair's view that a good school, in a poor, low-income neighbourhood, can make a difference. According to educational academics Mortimer and Rutter, good schools can make a difference to the 'life chances' of all pupils. Teachers who have high expectations; 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

headteachers, who are committed to a strong achieving ethos, which promotes self-confidence and self-esteem amongst students.

In 2003 the Labour government established the London Learning Challenge based on this perspective. In the last decade schools across disadvantaged city boroughs such as Hackney and Islington, with a child poverty rate of 41 per cent, have seen the class gap gradually narrow.

Despite these accomplishments, schools, however good or outstanding, can't compensate for the inequalities in the real social world. Good schooling can help to mitigate inequality but it can't eradicate it. As Professor Diane Reay writes: 'We need to look beyond the school gates rather than within them. There is only so much that educational institutions can do to improve social class inequalities, given the economic and social context in which they operate'.

Furthermore, as John Smyth and Robin Simmons point out in their forthcoming book *Education and Working Class Youth*, a raft of free market policy measures such as league tables, school choice, academies, free schools, charter schools, 'performativities and managerialism' alongside 'image and impression management' have obscured the crucial importance of social class to educational success. Even former Ofsted boss Sir Michael Wilshaw remarked that academisation had failed to boost standards in Northern and Midlands secondary schools. For Wilshaw: 'Doncaster, where every secondary school is an academy, has a miserable attainment and progress score'.

One of the key factors for working-class under-achievement is poverty and material circumstances. In Newcastle Central, over 37 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 2015, 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 and poor parenting are more to blame than schools for poor exam results. The reality is 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 among more aspirational

white and BME working-class communities this appears to be slowly breaking down across the city - though not in urban coastal communities like Blyth and Hartlepool.

Of course, the fact remains that professional / managerial parents possess the 'cultural and social capital' to get their kids into the top universities like Durham, Newcastle and Oxford. Many middle class students can afford to follow unpaid internships in attractive careers such as journalism or public relations. Only last year an important report by Alan Milburn, the Government's then social mobility czar, noted that many employers are biased in favour of the elite Russell Group universities that 80 per cent of middle-class youngsters attend.

To reverse this trend on a national level, some educationalists have argued that central government needs to abide by the Child Poverty Act, to minimise inequalities, introduced in 2010, and eradicate child poverty by 2020 as recommended by the Milburn Report.

To date, the Labour, Lib-Dem and Green Parties' educational policies have placed a spotlight on these issues. Education Achievement Zones committed to compensatory schooling, including breakfast clubs in poor neighbourhoods and free school dinners for all primary school pupils up to the age of 11 are recommended. Sure Start programmes aimed at deprived pre-school children under five need to be safeguarded.

The restoration of EMAs and student grants for youngsters from low-income households could also play a key role in boosting educational participation in the north.

Most schools and colleges in Britain are doing their best, with able and dedicated teachers with an emphasis on inclusive learning. Kids are working harder. But at the end of the day they can't compensate for the inequities of a socially divided nation.

If we're serious about raising the attainment levels of disadvantaged youngsters, elected mayors, devolved combined authorities and central government must adopt public policies to bring about a more equal and fairer society. The setting up of a North of the Tyne Learning Challenge based on the successful London model, made up of those who can walk the walk rather than talk the talk, is a regional priority.

Contrary to popular belief, the distinctions of social class haven't vanished. It's these that affect how well children do in their GCSE exams and the future laid out before them.

