

Education Committee

Left-behind white pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds

13 October 2020

First session:

- Professor Lee Elliot Major, Professor of Social Mobility, University of Exeter
- Professor Matthew Goodwin, Professor of Politics and International Relations, University of Kent
- Professor Diane Reay, Emeritus Professor of Education, University of Cambridge

Second session:

- Mary Curnock Cook OBE
- Professor Becky Francis, Chief Executive, Education Endowment Foundation
- Dr Sam Baars, Director of Research and Operations, The Centre for Education and Youth

Overview

MPs heard that there was a persistent gap in educational attainment between white working-class pupils and their peers. They asked panellists about the reasons behind this gap, and heard a variety of explanations: negative experiences of education that stretch back generations, a narrow and elitist curriculum, and a "status deficit" among this group. Panellists suggested that early years interventions and ways of boosting vocational education could be potential solutions to the problem. MPs also heard that the Covid-19 pandemic is likely to have widened the attainment gap.

In the second session, MPs heard that persistent disadvantage and early inequalities in reading and literacy levels might explain the attainment gap. Witnesses also discussed the attainment gap between boys and girls, which MPs heard was down in part to a cultural idea of masculinity that did not fit well with success in education. MPs heard evidence about the role of teaching quality in driving up attainment for poorly performing pupils. Panellists also discussed the importance of early years' interventions and the role of teacher expectations in educational attainment. MPs also asked questions about the government's catch-up fund and national tutoring programme.

Statistical evidence on white working-class pupil attainment

Witnesses told the committee that the data on educational attainment for white working-class pupils revealed a persistent gap in outcomes between this group and other groups.

Professor Lee Elliot Major, Professor of Social Mobility, University of Exeter, said that around one-third of white pupils on Free School Meals achieved the "basic benchmark" of five GCSEs at age 16. He said these figures had not changed in recent years, even while the educational attainment of other groups had been improving.

Professor Diane Reay, Emeritus Professor of Education, University of Cambridge, said there was even evidence that the gap between white pupils on free school meals and other groups worsened in 2018 and 2019.

Professor Matthew Goodwin, Professor of Politics and International Relations, University of Kent, agreed with the other panellists, telling MPs that the rates of white British 15 years olds in state education still in education four years later were just 13 per cent for boys and 19 per cent for girls. The rates for children from other ethnic groups are higher, he said.

Goodwin added that he believed the situation for white working-class pupils had deteriorated since an Education Committee inquiry into the issue in 2014.

Reasons for the attainment gap

Witnesses advanced different explanations for the attainment gap between white working-class pupils and their peers from other socio-economic groups.

Major highlighted the fact that many white working-class pupils lived in areas with poor employment opportunities and the impact of poor experiences of education extending back generations among these working-class communities. He said many in these communities, as a result, do not view education as a "vehicle for moving on in life".

Reay said the attainment gap had in part to do with an education system that was designed to contain a group viewed as "unruly", a history that she claimed still dogs the system today. She added that a "narrow, elitist, exclusive" curriculum made it more difficult for working-class children to succeed.

Committee chair Robert Halfon (Con, Harlow) put it to the panellists that these factors would affect different working-class ethnic groups equally rather than having a particularly negative impact on white working-class pupils.

Major said that he did not think that a multigenerational history of having poor experiences of schooling did characterise all ethnic groups equally, suggesting this was particularly an issue among white working-class communities .

"Status deficit"

Goodwin focused on cultural factors and factors within the family, which he claimed might explain the attainment gap.

He suggested that a recent shift in the "national conversation" in relation to identity and other ethnic groups has led to white working-class children feeling "as though they are not being given as much recognition and esteem as others", a "status deficit" that he suggested might help account for the attainment gap.

Goodwin also said that factors within the household must have something to do with the problem. By the age of five, many white working-class children were already falling behind their peers, he said, suggesting that "there is something going on within the household" that researchers had to do more to understand.

Reay said she agreed with Goodwin's analysis. She said there was a sense of resentment and of being left behind among the white working class.

Problems of measurement

Members wanted to know whether the ways of measuring white working-class pupil attainment were adequate.

David Simmonds (Con, Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) asked whether "white British pupils on free school meals " was a good proxy for white working-class pupils. Major said that while it was "pragmatic" for policymakers to use this measure, it had its limitations. He suggested that looking at the bottom two quintiles of the income distribution could help to capture more of the target group.

Reay said research from the Institute for Fiscal Studies showed that the measure fails to capture a fifth of the poorest pupils in society and so was in this respect too narrow. She said the measure was also unstable, given the huge increase in applications for free school meals during the pandemic.

Fleur Anderson (Lab, Putney) asked whether there were better proxies for measuring the attainment of these pupils than the basic benchmark, referred to by Major, of achieving five GCSEs.

Major said it was necessary to look at a range of key benchmarks, including basic literacy levels at the end of primary school and the proportion of pupils receiving a 4 in their GCSEs.

Importance of early years

Reay said there was a need to focus particularly on early years' provision in tackling the attainment gap.

She told the committee that white working-class pupils were on average nine months behind at the end of primary school and that this gap increased by the end of secondary school. But she said 40 per cent of the gap at the end of primary school was already present when these children started school.

The lesson from this evidence, she said, was that while the educational system exacerbates this unequal starting point, there was also a need to focus on early years' provision in order to narrow the attainment gap.

Vocational education

Simmonds asked whether there were other countries the UK could look to in seeking to tackle the attainment gap.

Major and Goodwin highlighted the importance of boosting vocational education, with Major pointing to Australia and Goodwin to Austria, Denmark, Germany, and Switzerland as examples the UK might follow.

Major said the education system currently created a narrow academic race that is unwinnable for certain groups of society, particularly white working-class pupils. He said the rational response from these pupils was thus to shun education.

Goodwin also said that "mentorship" could play an important role in boosting attainment among white working-class boys.

Impact of the pandemic

Apsana Begum (Lab, Poplar and Limehouse) asked the panellists what impact they believed the Covid-19 pandemic would have on the attainment gap between white working-class pupils and their peers.

Reay said she believed the impact would be enormous and that the catch-up fund announced by the government will "only just touch the surface of what we really need to do" to recover. She said the pandemic had highlighted inequalities in the home learning environments available to pupils.

Major agreed, saying that 25 per cent of pupils have had less than an hour's help a week from parents during lockdown.

Major said the national tutoring programme announced by the government would help, but he said it was crucial that tutors were targeted at those areas of most acute need.

Goodwin said that if, as he suspected, a lot of what is driving the attainment gap has to do with what goes on in the home, it is likely that the pandemic will have magnified the problem.

Second session:

- Mary Curnock Cook OBE
- Professor Becky Francis, Chief Executive, Education Endowment Foundation
- Dr Sam Baars, Director of Research and Operations, The Centre for Education and Youth

Explanations of attainment gap

The chair asked panellists why white working-class pupils were lagging behind their peers in educational attainment.

Professor Becky Francis, Chief Executive, Education Endowment Foundation, replied that there was evidence that persistent disadvantage is more responsible for attainment gaps in education than regional disparities, schooling quality, and ethnicity. She said that there had been very little progress in closing the gap between white working-class children and their peers since 2014.

She also emphasised the importance of early reading and literacy, which she said were foundational for future success at school. Francis said that, because of a "cultural construction of masculinity"

according to which reading was a "girly" pursuit, many white working-class boys fall behind in reading and literacy early on.

Mary Curnock Cook OBE said it is clear there was a "structural disadvantage" for large numbers of pupils in predominantly white areas of the country, which she said were typically marked by lower levels of funding for education, high levels of teacher vacancies, and higher unemployment.

Dr Sam Baars, Director of Research and Operations, The Centre for Education and Youth, said children growing up in deprived urban areas were five times more likely to aspire to a highly skilled job than children growing up in equally deprived non-urban areas, even when controlling for ethnicity. He said this was evidence of an "area-based" factor in explaining the gap.

Differences between girls and boys

Francis also highlighted the attainment gap between white working-class boys and girls, and between working class boys and girls of black Caribbean heritage.

She said that over the past 20 years, girls had picked up the message that educational attainment is important for their careers, while boys had struggled because of an idea of masculinity that does not fit well with the focus of schooling on diligent work.

Still, she said, it was important not to overstate the attainment gap between white working-class boys and girls, as both these groups were still behind their more affluent peers.

Curnock Cook said solving the problem of boys' underachievement in particular could go a long way to solving the problem of white working-class pupil underachievement in general, and she suggested that a lack of male role models in the classroom might have something to do with the issue.

But the panel was split on this point. Francis said her own research showed that there is no relation between teacher gender and educational attainment. Baars agreed with Francis on this point.

Importance of early years

Anderson asked what stage Government should focus on in seeking to intervene in order to close the attainment gap.

Echoing evidence from the first panel, Curnock Cook said early years was top of her list. She said early literacy was particularly important, especially for boys, and that the early gaps in attainment between different groups were particularly hard to close.

Francis agreed that early intervention, with a particular focus on literacy and numeracy, and a boost to the pupil premium for early years, would help.

Teacher quality

Francis told the committee that the quality of teaching was a crucial factor in driving up attainment for poorly performing pupils.

She said disadvantaged children in highly performing schools tended to outperform more advantaged children in more poorly performing school, and that teacher supply and retention and the number of staff with subject expertise tended to be issues in areas of the country with high proportions of white working-class pupils.

She said she wanted teaching to become a more high-status and appealing career choice, with the status of teachers more akin to that of doctors and other high-status professions.

Francis said that while improving teaching quality is just one aspect of the solution, her organisation is focused on the "art of the possible".

Teacher expectations

Witnesses suggested that teacher expectations may be playing some role in poor educational outcomes for white working-class pupils.

Baars said he had seen evidence to suggest that teacher expectations can have a negative influence on outcomes for white working-class boys and black Caribbean-heritage boys.

Catch-up fund and national tutoring programme

Witnesses welcomed the catch-up fund and the national tutoring programme but suggested that the support would not be enough by itself to help pupils recover from the effects of the pandemic on their education.

Francis said her organisation had published a guide on how the catch-up funding should be used. She said the national tutoring programme is a key plank of the government's response but that there would need to be more sustained support in order to compensate for the lost learning over the lockdown period.

Curnock Cook agreed, saying that it was important that the government did not view this as a one-year problem. She also called for the tutoring programme to be extended to key stage 5 pupils.