



Left behind white pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds - Summary

House of Commons - Committee Summary - Education Select Committee

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Education Committee

Left behind white pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds

17th November 2020

Witnesses

- Helena Mills CBE, Chief Executive Officer, BMAT Education
- Nick Hurn OBE, Chief Executive Officer, Bishop Wilkinson Catholic Education Trust
- Clementine Stewart, Vice-Chair of Governors, Langford Primary School
- Claire-Marie Cuthbert, Chief Executive Officer, Evolve Trust
- Andrew Smith, Chief Executive Officer, Learning Pathways Academy
- Ruth Robinson, Executive Principal, Swindon and Nova Hreod Academies

Overview

The committee heard from a group of head teachers of their experiences teaching white pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds. They were told that parental support and ambition for their children, felt different within white working class homes as opposed to those from an ethnic background.

Experiences of white working class families

Helena Mills, CEO of BMAT Education set out to the committee that many white working class families do not set high educational ambitions for their children and that poor parenting among white working class families was to blame for low aspirations among children.

She told the committee that families in deprived white communities were less likely to encourage their children to work hard at school than other ethnic groups as there was a disregard for education.

Mills went on to describe to the committee that they had some schools with high numbers of disadvantaged pupils, with the majority of those being from black and ethnic minority groups. She asserted that those parents made their children study and also emphasised from a young age the importance of good grades and going on to university. Although stereotyping she said there were significant numbers amongst poorer white families where the parents were not saying that.

On the role that schools should play when parenting was poor, Mills stated that the school took on an increasingly important role and could make a real difference. She advocated extra resources and funding for schools to make that difference.

Considering the experiences of teachers, Mills told MPs that her teachers had been driven to look for work outside the profession as they faced aggression from families on a daily basis, describing the tough conditions working in communities with disadvantaged families who did not support them.

Asked whether the home environment has an effect on disadvantaged white pupils compared with their peers from other ethnic backgrounds, Robinson said her schools had extended the school day to address these issues – noting that the parental support and ambition for their children felt different within white working class homes. She commented that many children from ethnic backgrounds would be encouraged to study for a number of hours at home each day, which was not the case within a white working class community.

Ruth Robinson, executive principal at Swindon and Nova Hreod Academies went on to surmise that poorer white families often lacked the support of extended family structures and a sense of community.

Mills advocated the extra funding for schools to take on the extra parental role and relieve the pressure on parents. She joked that if they could bath and put the children to bed, they would.

Nick Hurn, CEO of the Bishop Wilkinson Catholic Education Trust, described an ingrained attitude that existed among families in the area where he worked, which served predominantly white disadvantaged children. He outlined a disregard for education from these communities with large proportions of families who struggled to help their children. He identified pre-school education as an area that was a real challenge. He detailed how many of their children starting school without developed language skills, immediately putting them at a disadvantage.

He described a poverty of aspiration in white disadvantaged areas, and reported examples of some teenage pupils had never left their estate before going on a day trip to Newcastle.

Digital divide

The committee were told about the digital divide of disadvantaged families that was accentuated during the first lockdown where the only access many children had to technology was through their mother's phone.

On the government's investment on laptops for disadvantaged pupils, Andrew Smith, chief executive officer of the Learning Pathways Academy commented that laptops were all very well and good but only if there was broadband access and stressed the need for supply the infrastructure behind the laptops.

Claire-Marie Cuthbert, chief executive officer of the Evolve Trust raised the issue of the high cost of broadband that was not an option for many disadvantaged families and encouraged this to be levelled up.

Engagement with disadvantaged white parents

On tactics that worked well to engage disadvantaged white parents, Clementine Stewart, vice-chair of governors at Langford Primary School, advocated building relationships at the earliest possible opportunity; even before the child started school. She stressed the importance of holding parents to account to bring about meaningful change and advocated community events to bring parents to, often with the lure of food.

Hurn emphasised the need to give parents the tools to support their child's learning with lessons on how to get the right messages across.

Adult education

Addressing the importance of adult qualifications, Cuthbert outlined her experience of third generation unemployment and echoed the call to give the parents the right tools to educate their own children, noting the different methods for teaching between generations.

Mills stressed that if disadvantages were to be tackled then adult education needed to be addressed first, explaining their classes to teach parents digital learning and basic maths skills.

Impact of coronavirus

Considering the widening of educational attainment as a consequence of the coronavirus, Hurn listed the lack of digital connections, lack of ability for children to work from home and declining motivations for children.

Robinson stressed again the need for entitlement for all children to have digital access and noted the costs that came with that.

Mills pointed that it was too early to tell what the gap was.

2021 exams

The panel went on to respond to questions regarding the plans for next year's exams and the impact different approaches would have on poorer pupils and heard that cancelling exams in 2021 would not result in pupils becoming disengaged. The headteachers pledged to work with whatever system they were presented with.

Robinson disputed the assertion made by Ofsted that older pupils would not return to school if exams were called off. She asserted that she believed that every school leader was responsible for making sure their pupils were motivated, so whatever system they were given, they would help their children rise to that challenge.

Hurn also said he disagreed with the Ofsted chief noting that whatever system they were dealt, they would make it work.

Mills outlined her experience of pupils that returned in September were more terrified of centre-assessed grades than they were of exams. She told the committee that her pupils had never been so nice to their teachers and were working incredibly hard knowing that they could face a centre-assessed grade.

Cuthbert called for clarity on exactly what would happen next year, warning that ambiguity was having an impact on pupils. She stressed that whatever system was chosen to be used, the kids just wanted to know what was going to happen.

Centre-assessed grades

The committee went on to consider the suggested "hybrid" model of exams suggested by Amanda Spielman where exams would only be held in the core subjects with centre assessed grades for the other subjects.

Hurn told the committee the option of a hybrid model of exams and centre-assessment grades was worth exploring and that while a hybrid idea could work, the centre-assessed grades would need to be moderated correctly this time round.

Robinson added she could see how it would work, maybe with English, maths and science having exams and others with centre-assessed grades, but stressed that there would need to be a very strong moderation process in place.

Cuthbert said a hybrid model would be the best of both worlds. She stated that she believed that an exam was the fairest way to judge how children perform in normal circumstances, but that this was not normal

circumstances. She pointed out that terminal examinations at the end of this academic year would cause huge disparity as they would not allow for a level playing field.

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