Education Committee
Left behind white pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds
1 December 2020

Witnesses:

- Edward Davies, Director of Policy, Centre for Social Justice;
- Matt Leach, Chief Executive Officer, The Local Trust;
- Miriam Jordan Keane, Chief Marketing and Sales Officer, The National Citizen Service;
- Katie Sullivan, 'Get Active' Youth Work Co-ordinator, Regenerate UK;
- Suzanne Wilson, Research Fellow in Social Inclusion and Community Development, University of Central Lancashire

Overview

In this session the witnesses discussed the left behind white pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds, focusing in particular on the importance of families, schools, youth organisations and the social community assets.

Family circumstances

David Simmonds (Con, Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) asked the witnesses to reflect on the role of the family circumstances and elaborate on what they believed to be the principal causes of educational underachievement.

Matt Leach began by saying that it was important to look at the role that the particular place and area played. In the communities they had been working with, deprivation and a loss of social infrastructure which led to a fraying of the social fabric appeared to be associated with significantly poorer educational outcomes. This was especially visible after the GCSE level, with few students between the ages of 16 and 24 moving on to further education. In his opinion, the communities that became known as 'left behind' were peripherally located with predominantly white British populations. Therefore, it was important to look at educational underachievement not through the lenses of ethnicity but through the characteristics of the place.

Committee focus

Simmonds asked the witnesses to say what might help disadvantaged communities and what the committee should be focusing on.

Suzanne Wilson answered that when looking at the traditional white working-class families, they were often seeing them coming from these left-behind communities, which have historically felt neglected by central policy, experienced hardship and perceived fewer social mobility opportunities. Very often these groups were concentrated in post-industrial regions where traditional employment opportunities for the working class were no longer available, leaving students educationally isolated.

Role of 'place'

Tom Hunt (Con, Ipswich) commented on Leach's point that place was the key issue and asked what analysis had been done to compare different places and the educational performance of white working-class pupils to that of other low-income ethnic groups.

Edward Davies began by saying that while place was important, in his opinion the family circumstances were the key, frequently overlooked issue. All statistics showed family was a big factor in determining educational performance, and still it was only rarely talked about. He referred to various statistics and research papers to support his point of view.

Understanding family problems

Simmonds asked whether there was a real understanding of the prevalence of family problems and why that was a factor across different social groups.

Miriam Jordan Keane answered that in her opinion there was not a sufficient understanding of family problems and that they could do with knowing more. She spoke of the work they did in the North East and South West, where there were high percentages of working-class people, many identifying as white British. She believed that while what happened in the classroom was very valuable, they needed to find other ways to access the home environment and understand it. In her opinion, youth clubs and football clubs were a good way of gaining a deeper understanding of the family situation of pupils.

Austerity and funding

Kim Johnson (Lab, Liverpool, Riverside) asked the witnesses if they believed that 10 years of austerity and a lack of funding in disadvantaged areas had had a significant impact on children living there.

Leach said that when it came to the left behind communities, they had not just seen a decrease in funding for the community-based organisations, but also the withdrawal of the private sector. These were the places where pubs, shops and clubs had closed. In his opinion, the real issue was not just about public spending, but also about the entire experience of people working in these areas.

Support for families

Hunt asked how important it was for families to have guidance and support to get involved in their children's learning.

Keane noted that this was a really interesting question. She said in her organisation they were focusing on the young people themselves, while recognising that the whole family background was extremely important. They were helping young pupils build the resilience and confidence that allowed young people to perform better than they would otherwise. In her opinion, finding ways to get the young people involved in extracurricular activities could truly help with the tricky situations at home.

Katie Sullivan added that she saw support and engagement with the families as a triangle, comprising of the family, school and youth organisations. In her opinion, in order to adequately support parents, one needed in increase capacity within that triangle. That was why it was often easier for youth organisations to engage than schools, as they were in a unique position to do so.

Collaborative approach

Christian Wakeford (Con, Bury South) asked whether the collaborative approach between schools, organisations and parents should be brought in earlier in a child's life.

Suzanne Wilson said that primary schools were key institutions, embedded in the communities where parents lived, and as a result had an advantage there. The parents she had spoken to said that doors were open at primary schools and closed at secondary schools. In her opinion, the most important

thing for parents was to have those conversations when picking up their children from schools, maintaining and building those informal relations with teachers. She believed that this relationship was key, and the earlier it was built the better.

Davies added that he would go one step further and even argue that education needed to think outside of the educational sphere to make this right.

Help with homework

Caroline Johnson (Con, Sleaford and North Hykeham) asked a question on the ability of parents to provide help to their children with homework.

Wilson answered that there was a lot of evidence around the impact of what academics called the "education socialisation", which was essentially the time that one invested in doing homework with the children. In her research she found that oftentimes parents were doing a lot of good things supporting their children but lacked the confidence to apply their skills to the child's education.

Schools and other organisations

Hunt asked how important it was for schools and other organisations to form strong relations with disadvantaged white families.

Sullivan answered that building trust and relationships. providing opportunities and broadening young people's horizons was one of the most important thing schools could do. Moreover, organisations were a key way of providing young people who might not like the school system with alternative opportunities to develop their soft skills. These relations were what young people felt they could always come back to, and therefore it was important to build the pillars in the community of those relationships that young people could rely on.

Initiatives

Fleur Anderson (Lab, Putney) asked the witnesses to outline the key benefits of initiatives such as the National Citizen Service for disadvantaged young people. Keane said that these initiatives helped young people build confidence and resilience, especially those coming from more disadvantaged parts of society who joined the programme with very low confidence. This could then impact on the other siblings and the rest of the family, and help the young perform better in the classroom.

Sullivan agreed. In her opinion, it was all about opportunity and how to increase access to it. The role of her organisation was to increase access to these opportunities, helping young people realise their skills and potential and allowing them to find a real purpose for themselves. This supported educational attainment, simply because of goals setting.

Support for initiatives

Anderson asked Sullivan whether the support for groups such as Regenerate was sufficient.

Sullivan answered that definitely the young provision had seen a massive decline. Nevertheless, at Regenerate they had a lot of support and had been in the community for a long time, but they were an exception and more needed to be done.

Educational performance and community assets

The Chair Robert Halfon (Con, Harlow) asked a question on the relationship between the educational performance of disadvantaged children and community assets.

Leach answered that their data showed that where there were low levels of social capital and infrastructure, educational outcomes were definitely worse. That was not to say that there were no poor areas with higher levels of social capital where one could find better education performance, such as London. In some of the deprived areas they were working with they were giving the money to the local people to get them to deliver solutions. By doing that, they found that often local communities knew what they wanted to achieve with the given funds and would deploy the money to achieve those aims.

Mentoring programmes

Jonathan Gullis (Con, Stoke-on-Trent North) commented that existing hierarchical structures did not deliver as they should. He asked whether the focus should be on mentoring programmes and tutoring opportunities instead of physical buildings.

Leach commented that he believed the issue was not simply the buildings, even though communities did need places to meet. In his opinion it was better to look at how to make good use of buildings. He spoke about the importance of gaining the trust of the community, and focusing on restoring that social fabric in the communities where trust was low.

COVID-19 pandemic

Apsana Begum (Lab, Poplar and Limehouse) asked how the pandemic affected disadvantaged white families.

Davies began by saying that the work they did looked at different areas of deprivation, and showed that the pandemic did not bring forward new ways of deprivation, but it exacerbated existing ones. Some issues that were ramping up were domestic abuse, unemployment etc. On the issue of families, he spoke about a report that came out two weeks ago which found that children had regressed during the time of the pandemic. In his view, this was not solely because of deprivation levels, but also depended on the support structures in the homes.

Alternatively, for some children mental health improved during the lockdown because they had good and stable relationships with their families. Davies was convinced that recessions would happen again, and said it was important to question what gave children resilience.

Resilience

Begum asked what allowed young people to build resilience. Keane said that the sense of coming together with other people from different backgrounds definitely helped children.

She spoke about the loneliness experienced during the pandemic, and the importance of the recognition that one was not alone in feeling that. In her opinion, young people's sense of purpose and self-worth was enhanced by the feeling that they were contributing to making their communities safer and better.