

Education Committee

Left behind white pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds

07 January 2021

Witnesses

- Professor Liz Barnes, Vice Chancellor, Staffordshire University
- Chris Millward, Director for Fair Access and Participation, Office for Students
- Rae Tooth, Chief Executive, Villiers Park Educational Trust
- Dr Graeme Atherton, Director, The National Education Opportunities Network (NEON)
- Karen Spencer MBE, Principal, Harlow College

Overview

The Education Committee explored the reasons for why white pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds did not achieve as much as their counterparts in schools and higher education institutions. Topics under discussion included family life, working class culture, geography and place, access to apprenticeships and the impact of the coronavirus pandemic.

Covid-19

Asked how Covid-19 had affected loss of learning for disadvantaged white pupils, Professor Liz Barnes, Vice Chancellor, Staffordshire University noted that, although additional funding had been received during the lockdowns, many students had been taken out of their work placements and that the mental health impact of Covid-19 had been very high.

Chris Millward, Director for Fair Access and Participation, Office for Students added that this had implications for access to higher education and general student success, and that it was important that this didn't further disadvantage students were already disadvantaged to begin with. Polling was being conducted with students in higher education to assess the impacts of digital and blended learning, as well as monitoring dropout rates and notifications from students. There were not yet any indicators on attainment, but it was clear that there was an increased demand in mental health services.

Karen Spencer MBE, Principal, Harlow College stated that excellent support was being received from local county council programs under difficult circumstances, but students and staff were becoming very weary. Retention, however, was being maintained.

Dr Graeme Atherton, Director, The National Education Opportunities Network (NEON) added technology was being distributed, but even this alone was not enough – parents needed more support on how to plan lessons and prepare for home schooling. Rae Tooth, Chief Executive, Villiers Park Educational Trust added that 20% of young people didn't have internet access at home, with usually only one phone for the whole household, meaning across the board poor quality learning environments at home.

Parenting

Apsana Begum MP (Lab, Poplar and Limehouse) asked whether experiences on parenting and family relationships were being brought to light, to which Tooth responded that it was very difficult for

parents to monitor and motivate children, or to talk about subjects they knew nothing about. Atherton hoped to see more use of television to provide educational programming, so parents were not forced to carry the burden alone. Barnes added that there should be more activities and food services in term time as well as during holidays.

Geography

Place was very important in the upbringing of children through education, noted Millward. This started from the point of being a baby, where absenteeism could be identified from a tender age, as well as the issue of local unemployment and family background. Spencer called this 'the postcode lottery', creating a feedback loop of inequality in poor areas while rich areas had 'added value' benefits.

Tooth pointed to research from Oxford University that looked at community understanding, in which white working class communities provided lower aspirations than their BAME counterparts due to the belief that they were not particularly underprivileged or oppressed, a deep rooted perspective around education and advantage that meant they did not see themselves as underachieving.

Black males

Kim Johnson MP (Lab, Liverpool, Riverside) asked why black males were excluded in disproportionate numbers compared to their white counterparts. Spencer replied that it's a complex issue, but that it could rely on cultural understandings of teachers, who often don't recognize people's behaviours from different backgrounds which can exhibit different behaviours – which impacts perceptions and processes. Many BAME children feel systems don't support them, so they may rail against them.

Early years

Questioned whether the catch-up premium should be extended to toddlers by Christian Wakeford MP (Con, Bury South), Barnes noted that nurseries remained open during the lockdown and that a lot of investment had gone to early years education in recent years. The Family By Family Scheme had seen significant impact, looking at how families could work with each other to help.

Educational experiences

The key issue was the gap between working class children on free school meals and their counterparts, noted Millward. This depended on a multitude of factors, including place and socioeconomic background – but we shouldn't get the idea that these families didn't want their children to succeed, noted Atherton.

White privilege

Tom Hunt MP (Con, Ipswich) stated that popular culture had instilled the idea these children were not underprivileged. Tooth replied that this was context specific, but that language should revolve around young people being future leaders, helping them build routes towards achieving their ambitions and removing themselves from community or household pressures.

Apprenticeships

In rural and coastal communities especially, finding good quality apprenticeships was proving difficult, as leaving home was a requirement to access. More generally, there was a lack of guidance in schools for apprenticeships. Atherton hoped to see support reach as far as Year 7 for information – currently there was no such scaffolding.

Degree apprenticeships had increased substantially – but those who were best connected were still taking up most of these opportunities. Without signposting, and with requirements such as GCSE Maths and English, there were significant barriers for underprivileged students.

Spencer noted that, if families lost access to benefits, their children would not go for apprenticeships. There was also an assumption parents understood information they were given and translated this to their children, which she called ‘a fundamentally cyclical issue’.

Careers advice

Specialist careers advisors were required – or at least upskilling was needed – for these to be effective. There was patchy access to careers advice, largely dictated on whether schools had a sixth form, although a lot of lip service was being paid to careers advice.

Spencer believed many schools were better off with the now-defunct independent Connexions service, which was at least functioning. Barnes hoped to see a reintroduction of away days, which provided a day of experience in college or higher education for students and the opportunity to see prospective futures.

Tooth added that students needed multiple pathways through education towards student ambitions, to work around obstacles that may come in their way. The Step Up Scheme had been useful in this regard, with 12-week courses before students arrived at university to help them understand what HE learning looked like.

Applications

Millward explained that, although UCAS was well understood and mature as an application pathway, there was no such system for jobs and apprenticeships, especially due to the need to involve SME employers and the complexity of localism. He hoped next year’s admissions reform would help embrace different routes.

There was also a concern around predicted grades, which were more interested in achievement rather than potential, lacking context on the distance travelled by students in achieving certain grades. The admissions system, while robust, had been made for a time when around 5% of young people applied for higher education – that number was now closer to 40%. Choice-making started much earlier than filling out the form, added Atherton, therefore UCAS needed to be involved once students started to consider applications from the very beginning.

Local education ecosystems

Barnes believed a joined-up approach was important here, with FE colleges providing pathways into apprenticeship and employment as well as university places. Spencer hoped to see a wholesale review of curricula to connect this strategy across ages and stages, rather than retain the hierarchical system that was currently in place. A lack of dialogue between FE and HE sectors was making this more difficult.

Targets

White British students on free school meals were the lowest scoring in terms of participation in higher education. Millward hoped to see this evolve, and was in the process of developing new measures to align place with other aspects of status, including gender and poverty.

Outcomes

Only around 20 per cent of disadvantage students in Barnes' area of Stoke were going forward, which was not acceptable. Collective solutions were sought, through schemes such as Working Together, but she explained that there needed to be the result of decent jobs at the other end of the process – which meant the role of employers was more important than ever before. Spencer wished to see long-term investment in overarching strategies, rather than short-term piecemeal solutions that had been proven not to work.

Culture

The Chair questioned how much low attainment was due to cultures within communities and families in white working class areas. Tooth responded that it was difficult to quantify – but that lived traumas were more prevalent in these areas and were certainly a factor.

Spencer noted that many of these students' parents were themselves stuck at Level 1 or 2 education and hoped to see those people upskilled, through funding or universal credit systems that provided them the right to study. She explained the Essex Phenomenon of self-identifying with pride at poor educational outcomes as a potential limiting factor.

Millward called it 'a multigenerational issue' that required the engagement of parents and mature students. Barnes hoped to see early interventions in family life – where the greatest impact to mental health was apparent. Tooth noted that parents themselves had genuine fears in this area, as many did not themselves know how to live the lives they wanted for their children.