



## Left behind white pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds - Summary

House of Commons - Committee Summary - Education Select Committee

21/05/2021

**19 May 2021**

Witnesses:

- Dr Tony Sewell CBE, Chair, Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities;
- Martyn Oliver, Commissioner, Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities;
- Professor Steve Strand, Professor of Education, University of Oxford.

### **Overview**

In this session the witnesses discussed left behind white pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds, focusing in particular on the immigrant paradigm, the curriculum, the teaching workforce and racism.

### **Difference in performance**

The Chair Robert Halfon (Con, Harlow) asked the witnesses why white disadvantaged pupils were performing worse than other ethnic groups.

Dr Tony Sewell said that the issue of socio-economic disparity was a key driver of this. Out of the 20 most deprived neighbourhood, 19 were from the north. Other potential reasons, besides social deprivation, could be family aspirations, or schools' quality. When ethnic minorities had similar socio-economic issues, they did not necessarily perform worse in terms of attainment. For this reason, he believed geography was key.

Martyn Oliver added that they wanted to be clear that good schools were good for all types of children. He believed that all children benefited from good schools, good teaching, or good pastoral support. Moreover, geography, family income, opportunities and parental background also affected schools.

### **The immigrant paradigm**

The Chair asked Professor Steve Strand a question about the immigrant paradigm, and why it did not apply to disadvantaged white communities as well.

Steve Strand explained that the bottom line was that the longer one was exposed to poverty and disadvantage, the more stupefying its effects became. Therefore, those communities that experienced inter-generational unemployment and the closure of heavy industries had a less strong belief in the transformative power of education. This was true for white British, black Caribbean and people of mixed ethnicities. The overriding principle behind this paradigm was class, he said.

Sewell added that the high level of attainment was a very positive attribute in immigrant communities. In his opinion, the London factor was interesting, which had to be attributed to the numbers of immigrants there.

### **Family hubs**

The Chair asked where the new family hubs should be placed.

Oliver said that the Government should not be crude in its measurement of disparities. He said it was possible to drill low at a local level to identify pockets and disparities in the performance of children, and the family hubs should be placed in those areas.

### **Diversity of the workforce**

The Chair referred to evidence from the USA, and asked if the Government should incentivise a more diverse teaching workforce so as to increase attainment levels in pupils.

Sewell explained that organisations like Teach First should focus more on attracting high performing ethnic minority graduates.

Strand added this was a high quality and high status profession, which meant that universities could play a role. In his opinion university courses offered a satisfactory amount of practical experience. The teaching workforce was already very diverse in London, so the diversification of the workforce should improve in other areas of the country, but not everywhere.

Oliver added that the DFE was exploring some of these issues, including the representation of the community among the teaching workforce.

### **Ethnic disparities**

David Simmonds (Con, Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) asked the witnesses for their opinion on the state of ethnic disparities within the education system.

Strand said that there were three aspects of inequality: race, sex and class. The recent debate became one-sided, with people focusing on only one aspect of inequality, instead of taking a nuanced approach. If race, sex and class were analysed as a whole, it became easier to see the real size of these gaps (for example the social class gap was 8 times bigger than the black-white achievement gap). Moreover, different comparisons between different inequality sources revealed that white British young people were performing worse than their counterparts.

Sewell added that the research community should do more investigation into the 'success factor'. He wished he could see the success of Bangladeshi girls being celebrated, at least in London.

### **"Black masculinities and schooling"**

David Johnston (Con, Wantage) asked Sewell if the problems he had identified in his book "Black masculinities and schooling" still existed today.

Sewell said the same issues remained. However, he believed a change might occur, as the success rate of Black pupils was improving. This showed that the problem was more about culture, peer groups, and family. He was confident that these findings could be used to develop policy that would support families, and not condemn them or stigmatise them.

### **Funding for interventions**

Johnston also asked the witnesses how much funding would be needed to support the interventions necessary, from the early years all the way through to careers guidance for older students.

Sewell spoke of the £800m that currently went into the wider participation activities of universities. In his opinion, part of this resource should be moved into schools, so as to drive pupils into higher education. This would offer much more targeted in-school support, he suggested.

### **Religion**

Tom Hunt (Con, Ipswich) asked the witnesses how religion could explain some of the attainment disparities.

Sewell explained that religion played a positive effect for attainment levels, especially for students from ethnic minorities. In his opinion, religion and rituals could help build discipline and rituals.

Oliver added that being a part of a cohesive community group was beneficial and gave children greater exposure to adult interventions.

### **Pushback to diversity**

Hunt commented that he was concerned about the section in the report which referred to the pushback against the improvement of teaching staff's diversity from the majority ethnic groups.

Sewell said that they advocated for a more diverse workforce in classrooms. The key aim was to make pupils realise there was a wide range of teachers, from different backgrounds and different ethnic groups.

### **Racism**

Kim Johnson (Lab, Liverpool, Riverside) asked the witnesses if the education system should equip pupils with an understanding of how racism impacted on Black people.

Sewell agreed that pupils should be engaging in such areas. If there was space in the curriculum for such topics, they should definitely be included. Teachers should obey the law and follow the directions of the DFE, he added.

### **Unemployment of Black people**

Johnson also asked why Black people were twice as likely to be unemployed, despite achieving equally at school.

Sewell said there was probably racism in the labour market. They found that a high proportion of Black young people went to low-tariff universities and had high dropout rates. He believed apprenticeships should be made more attractive to young Black people, so that they could acquire skills that would help them survive in the labour market.

### **White privilege**

Hunt asked a question about the term 'white privilege' which he suggested could be alienating for many people. He asked the witnesses if this term had contributed to the disparity problem discussed today.

Sewell explained that the issue for poor disadvantaged people was not 'white privilege' or other academic phenomena, but practical matters like the lack of opportunities.

Oliver added that it was important to focus on bringing communities together, so using divisive terms was counter-productive. However, it was crucial to teach a shared knowledge and understanding of the community.

### **Refugees and asylum seekers**

Fleur Anderson (Lab, Putney) asked the witnesses why the report did not cover refugee and asylum-seeking children.

Sewell said that the data collection and the remit they had were the biggest problems. He agreed that this group needed more attention in terms of education outcomes.

### **Take-up rates of entitlements**

Anderson asked what evidence there was for the differences in take-up rates of childcare and early years entitlements offered.

Oliver said that they did not have sufficient data on this area. However, they supported the extension of childcare offer. Giving children a safe space throughout the early years, along with allowing them to engage in fruitful activities, led to an improvement in education attainment levels.

### **Aspiration levels**

Apsana Begum (Lab, Poplar and Limehouse) asked what schools and the Department could do to tackle the different levels of aspiration identified in the immigrant paradigm.

Oliver said that the report highlighted the different levels of aspiration, especially as it was precisely those pupils from non-disadvantaged areas who put more value on education.

Strand added that the higher achievement by many minority groups could be explained by their aspirations, their parents' aspirations, the number of nights a week spent doing homework and their self-assessment of their performance. It was important to consider when to allow young people to choose a curriculum for themselves, as for some young people subjects like history and geography were not as attractive as more vocation-oriented subjects.

Begum asked again what the department and schools could do to improve levels of attainment and aspiration.

Sewell said that there should be a policy designed for sharing good practice.

### **Regional job market**

Ian Mearns (Lab, Gateshead) asked if levels of aspirations were impacted on by locality or the jobs market at a regional level.

Sewell said that there was a generational issue in some areas where inter-generational unemployment was common. This role model then fed into the mentality of young people. In his opinion, parents were key to educating and inspiring young people to take up apprenticeships or go on to universities.

### **Parents' role**

Mearns commented that quite often the challenges pupils faced were related to their parents and families. He asked the witnesses how could the UK overcome this difficulty in tackling attainment levels.

Oliver agreed that this was a challenge. He believed that provisions like extended school days could allow children to get involved in sports and culture activities. Moreover, such initiatives could expose children to other adults, and help build a different type of discipline.

### **Curriculum**

Mearns asked if the narrowing of the curriculum was appropriate for all pupils in schools.

Sewell explained that the UK should be ambitious for its young people. He spoke about the importance of learning foreign languages for example. In his opinion, it was important to be ambitious for all young people, regardless of their backgrounds, and not assume a subject was too much or too difficult for them.

### **University**

Hunt asked the witnesses what proportion of white disadvantaged people were going to university.

Sewell said that schools could invest more in their workforce, which would in turn allow more white disadvantaged children to go further into higher education.

### **Racism**

Johnson spoke about islamophobia. She asked Sewell how racism impacted many communities across the UK.

Sewell agreed that racism was a real problem in the UK. Their first recommendation asked for the Equality and Human Rights Commission to be given more power.

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