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SUBMISSION TO EDUCATION SELECT COMMITTEE INQUIRY INTO THE UNDERACHIEVEMENT IN EDUCATION BY WHITE WORKING CLASS CHILDREN

Introduction

As the MP for Birmingham Northfield I welcome the opportunity to make a submission to the Education Select Committee inquiry into the educational underachievement of white working class children.

This submission builds on a debate I held on this issue in May 2009, when a report funded by Birmingham City Council revealed that a high number of white pupils on free school meals in Birmingham were performing poorly at schools.[1] My response focuses on the extent of – and factors leading to – white working class pupils educational underachievement, and approaches the Government can take in response. In summary, this submission:

- Highlights that there remains **a severe gap in educational achievement between white children with different levels of household income**, which is unique to this ethnic group.

- States that numerous factors associated with deprivation and poverty are creating this educational underachievement, and a response will take more than school based interventions. **The Government need to make major reform to the wider economic environment, housing, employment, welfare, and the rising cost of living** to successfully address the underlying causes of educational underachievement.

- Stresses that the Government should also consider targeted interventions to address the attainment gap, including policies to **raise school quality** in disadvantaged areas and **improve school engagement** with parents from low income backgrounds.

- **Calls for improved data and analysis of the educational achievement of different ethnic groups and income classes** is urgently needed to ensure the problem can be properly assessed and tackled.

- Underlines the need for **greater celebration of the – often diverse – heritage of Britain's white working class communities** in a positive and inclusive way, clearly differentiated from the racially divisive approach of groups such as EDL and BNP, must also be a priority.

Extent of White Working Class Underachievement

In 2010-2011 less than a third of white British students eligible for Free School Means (FSM) reached the national GCSE target of 5A*-C passes including English and Maths. Barely a quarter of boys, and just above a third of girls, achieved the target. In contrast, 63% of white British students not eligible for FSM reached the national target. The size of the attainment gap between FSM and non-FSM students is unique to the white ethnic group.[2]

In Birmingham, statistics from 2001-2003 revealed that following African Caribbean boys receiving FSM, the demographic groups least likely to achieve 5 A*-C at GCSE were white boys and girls receiving FSM. Looking beyond averages, the absolute numbers of white pupils underachieving in education makes this issue particularly concerning. In 2003, 486 white pupils (compared to 89 Pakistani pupils, 56 black pupils, and 18 Bangladeshi pupils) in Birmingham did not achieve any GCSE grades at all. [1]

In higher education, 2012 saw a fall of 54,000 white men applying to university, which was a decrease of 13% from 2011 – and four times higher than the reduction of female applicants.

Factors leading to White Working Class Underachievement

The reality is still that if you are white and disadvantaged, you are half as likely to achieve in education as those who are better off. **The odds are decisively stacked against poor white children achieving within the education system.**

The reasons for educational underachievement in impoverished groups are myriad and well documented. Inadequate housing, weak parental involvement, poor school quality, familial low income and unemployment, and low aspiration and expectation all contributing to why children from lower socio-economic groups are less successful at school.

The geographical areas in which white working class educational underachievement is most marked are also the areas that have undergone massive change in employment patterns and relative wealth. In many cases this is associated with the decline of large enterprises associated with traditional industries – such as manufacturing – over the last quarter of the 20th Century. Although some of those industries have undergone a major and very positive transformation in recent years (such as automotive), this innovation has often bypassed the people in the areas traditionally associated with those industries.

The result is that inequality has grown, albeit highly unevenly even in geographically compact areas, with pockets of high deprivation, low skills, high long term unemployment and low aspiration close to areas of relative affluence. This has a major impact in increasing educational underachievement in the areas concerned. There are lessons here about the impact of some of the government's current welfare reforms, which could further aggravate the problem. That these issues are beyond the scope of this paper should not minimise their importance.

The 'neighbourhood effect' – how a community socialises people – is also a leading factor in reinforcing cycles of low aspiration and underachievement.[3] Children in white working class communities do not benefit from the social and cultural capital of the middle classes, which is more conducive to success in education and schools. White children from disadvantaged backgrounds do not grow up with the knowledge – or role models – that demonstrate that education provides opportunity, or that hard work creates success and financial security.

School based interventions

In terms of specific interventions to address white underachievement at school, lessons can be learnt from success in reducing black minority ethnic disadvantage in education. Action is needed on a number of different levels:

1. **Recognition and analysis:**

In 2009 I stated that when statistics are compiled to inform education policy, the Government must subdivide the white ethnic group according to eligibility for free school meals. Although the results of white children on FSM are now collected, major improvements need to be made in the dissemination of data so that accurate conclusions and assessment can be made easily. Subdividing results by racial and economic categories needs to become routine and explicit if we are to better understand, and act upon, this issue.

2. **Schools:**

Schools – and teachers – are critical for equipping children with the skills, opportunities and behaviour that will help them succeed in later life. Raising school quality in disadvantaged areas is clearly of paramount importance for improving achievement. Schools in disadvantaged areas face resourcing pressures (such as equipment, subsidising the cost of trips, security and pastoral care) and difficulty in staff retention, standards and morale. **The Government should consider options for targeting funding on schools in areas with low white working class achievement beyond the Pupil Premium.** These could include measures to incentivise outstanding teachers, or support quality vocational schemes that provide real to alternatives to the academic route.

Research has also demonstrated that successful schools can have a small scale, local impact on regeneration within a community.[4] The impact that the new Bournville College – opened in 2010 with Labour Government funding for the regeneration of Longbridge after MG Rover collapsed in 2005 – has made in my constituency is testament to how well-run educational facilities can raise local aspiration and opportunities. Further targeted efforts, similar to that which funded Bournville, are needed. In light of this, the Department of Education must question the provision of resources and support for new free schools and academies in areas where there are already good schools – or where the development of improving schools could be undermined. Rather, the focus must be on targeting the areas of greatest need.

But, as noted above, a child's background and environment is almost decisive in determining their educational outcomes. Although improving school quality in disadvantaged areas is important, the Government must recognise that the impact a school can have in turning a child's life chances around is limited.

3. Parenting:

It has also been well noted that strong parental engagement is important for raising educational achievement.[5] Successful parenting for education includes the provision of a stable and secure environment for study, raising a child's aspiration and ambition, and crucially – strong participation with the school. However school discrimination, stereotyping and distrust of low income parents has been well noted and remains a barrier to the successful engagement of such families in their child's education.[6]

The Government need to consider how schools can improve engagement with families from disadvantaged backgrounds. Policies to ensure schools can constructively and positively engage with parents from white working class backgrounds will be crucial for ensuring parents will support, rather than restrict, educational achievement.

Tackling the Economic Environment

However, the Government must recognise that the **overall impact of a young person's external environment on attainment is enormous.** 3.5 million children in the UK live in poverty, a figure which is expected to rise further with the introduction of the Government's tax and benefit reforms.

Given the fundamental importance of economic inequality and community, there is a clear need to tackle and economic environment to increase white working class attainment. A piecemeal response - focusing solely on school based interventions and not tackling larger national questions of unemployment, skills, low pay and work insecurity, the poor availability and affordability of housing, and the rising cost of living – will be ineffective at improving opportunities for poor white children. At a more local level, there must be a concerted effort to ensure that physical and enterprise regeneration initiatives reach the areas concerned.

The importance of the wider economic environment in a child's education highlights why targeted educational initiatives of the kind outlined in this paper will need to consider the industrial heritage of the communities involved, and aim to dramatically boost skills in the industries of the future. But rather than as a wake for days gone by, this heritage needs to be celebrated and built on raise aspiration for the future.

An Inclusive Cultural Approach

Multi-culturalism has made a highly successful and valuable contribution to UK society – making our country more inclusive, tolerant and vibrant. But it is well documented that there has been insufficient recognition and celebration of the often diverse heritage of culture and identity of white communities, particularly in or near to major towns or in specific areas of the country – such as traditional coastal resorts. The Department of Education has previously acknowledged that needs to greater efforts made to include white people in discussions on diversity and identity,[7] but there is little evidence to demonstrate that the Government has actively pursued such policies.

Schools are important places for helping children explore their identity, and more emphasis needs to be made on how teachers can support white pupils to develop and express their culture and background. When developing such policies, the Government must be cautious to ensure that a white British history and narrative is not promoted at the expense of all other cultures – as is the danger with the current Secretary of State for Education's reform of national curriculum. It must also be clearly differentiated and unequivocally opposed to the racially divisive approach of groups such as English Defence League (EDL) and the British National Party (BNP).

The kind of approach articulated by performers such as Billy Bragg and academics such as the Birmingham community historian, Carl Chinn, may be useful in taking forward this expression of identity.

In brief, the focus must be on promoting a more inclusive approach, which celebrates the numerous different cultures that make up the 21st Century British identity and aims to ensure that the school environment gives children from all backgrounds a fair start.

1The Forward Partnership on behalf of the School Effectiveness Division, Children, Young People and Families Directorate, Birmingham City Council, *The Underachievement of White Disadvantaged Pupils in Birmingham,* Report 1, November 2008

2 GCSE and equivalent attainment by pupil characteristics in England: 2010 to 2011, Department for Education, February 2012

3 Ainsworth J (2002) why does it take a village? The mediation of neighbourhood effects on educational achievement Social Forces 81(1): 117-152

4 Crowther, D et al: How schools can contribute to area regeneration, the Policy Press 2003

5 Parsons S, Give your child a better chance, Campaign for Learning 2003

6 Lott B (2001) Low-income parents and the public schools, Journal of Social Issues pp 247-259

7DFES (2007a) Diversity and Citizenship Curriculum Review