

Born to Fail? Social Mobility A Working Class View

The recent Education Select Committee's report *The forgotten: how White working-class pupils have been let down, and how to change it*¹ highlights how White British pupils eligible for free school meals (FSM) persistently underperform compared with their peers in other ethnic groups, from the early years through to higher education. The report concludes that among the many factors that may combine to put White working-class pupils at a disadvantage are:

1. Persistent and multigenerational disadvantage
2. Placed-based factors, including regional economics and underinvestment
3. Family experience of education
4. A lack of social capital (for example the absence of community organisations and youth groups)
5. Disengagement from the curriculum
6. A failure to address low participation in higher education

In many ways these are self-evident, as are the solutions proposed by the committee:

1. Funding needs to be tailor-made at a local level to level up educational opportunity
2. Support parental engagement and tackle multi-generational disadvantage
3. Ensure the value of vocational training and apprenticeship options while boosting access to higher education
4. Attract good teachers to challenging areas
5. Find a better way to talk about racial disparities

However, we also need to ask - *Why have the many funded initiatives aimed at addressing the above failed to have sustained, national impact?*

The issue of social mobility is addressed by the Social Mobility Commission:

"In a more socially mobile society, everyone should have a choice, be aware of that choice and be able to exercise it. From birth people should have equal opportunities whether at home, school, further education (FE) college, university or in training...Everyone should be recruited on merit no matter which school or university they attended. The old boys' network must no longer be a passport to success...those from disadvantaged backgrounds should not be held back because they don't fit in." UK Government's Social Mobility Commission (2019) p.4²

The world, as we would like it to be, is a one where every child knows that with passion and focus and hard work, they can be whoever they want to be. Unfortunately, we do not live in that world yet.

¹ <https://committees.parliament.uk/committee/203/education-committee/news/156024/forgotten-white-workingclass-pupils-let-down-by-decades-of-neglect-mps-say/>

² <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/social-mobility-commission-strategy-2019>

Defining social mobility

Social mobility is achieving positive change in socio-economic status, and more widely, building better futures for all, in terms of wellbeing, health, and engagement with all that life has to offer.

To support social mobility, we must provide children and young people with real chances and choices. Chances and choices that are not determined by class, but by heritage, location, and self-efficacy. Chances and choices that are respectful of individuals. Chances and choices that are non-judgmental, and not defined by movement between classes or location. Chances and choices that provide opportunities for everyone to be included, and to belong. Chances and choices that prepare the way for everyone to succeed in life, in education, health, employment and housing.

Is equality of opportunity a core British value?

Do we, as a society, really care enough about equality of opportunity for all, to make a change?

Is the traditional national measure of educational achievement – maximised university entrance useful for, or even relevant to, working-class children and young people and children facing disadvantage whose priorities may be supporting themselves in a job and a home? If we are serious about unleashing the talent of all children and young people, regardless of their background, challenges or needs, we must consider new and innovative approaches to education.

Do we dare to change?

Equality of opportunity: a shared responsibility?

In my book *Born to Fail? Social Mobility: a Working Class View*,³ I argue that all education and business leaders, professionals, practitioners, parents or carers, and members of society have a shared responsibility to ensure that our education system (in its widest sense) gives every child and young person a right to real chances and choices and support that maximise their opportunities.

Born into poverty in the late 1950s, I am a champion for improving the aspirations of children from disadvantaged backgrounds. I assert that social mobility is about changing the way we think, act, and engage and crucially, understanding there is an alternative way to live to ensure everyone can succeed. **At the heart of which is mutuality.**

My story began when children, from the estates where I was growing up, participated in a study of disadvantaged children (later published in 1973 as *Born to Fail?*) and the enormous inequalities we suffered (health, family circumstances, educational development) were compared to what the authors then called 'ordinary' children.

Shockingly, the findings of the 1973 *Born to Fail* study⁴ are as real today as they were in the 1960s and 1970s. Children and young people are still not reaching their full potential because of education, poor housing, poor health outcomes, and a lack of care.

³ Blandford, S. (2017), *Born to Fail? Social Mobility: A Working Class View*, Woodbridge: John Catt Educational

⁴ Wedge, P. and Prosser, H. (1973), *Born to Fail?* London: National Children's Bureau

Following on from *Born to Fail?* In consultation with 14 eminent education, business, and policy leaders I put forward proposals in *'Social Mobility, Chance or Choice?'*⁵ based on a simple central premise: providing better and more meaningful chances and choices for children and young people will increase their future social mobility.

- By **chances**, I mean opportunities in an equal and mutual context where everyone is valued in education, training, and the workplace.
- By **choices**, I mean giving children and young people real agency in securing positive options for their future in terms of their: overall life-course; employment / career; and better health, wellbeing, security, happiness, and engagement in society. In short - true social mobility.

We can only offer real chances and choices through mutuality, where everyone is valued regardless of their background, challenges or needs.

If we are in a place and at a time when we are embracing new thinking, we must recognise the great things that have achieved by recent initiatives in health, social care and education but also acknowledge, accept, and address what has not worked and what is not working.

What is needed is a way of thinking that crucially *listens to, engages, and involves* the working class in determining what their future should be. An alternative way that values partnership, mutuality, and collaboration and which, by doing what is right, creates opportunities for all. What would happen if we responded to old questions with new thinking?

Why do working class children not achieve?

The need to understand how and why children can learn is fundamental to pedagogy – how teachers teach. Getting teaching right for white working class remains an ongoing challenge in many schools. An appropriate starting point might be to increase understanding of how working class, disadvantaged children, as well as those with special educational needs and disability (SEND), learn, refocus teacher training and professional training on this, and identify what is needed to prepare children for work. We need to change the mindset of the adults and services around schools to improve outcomes for all children. If you change the attitudes and behaviours of adults, you improve the attitudes and behaviours of the child. Language can be a barrier to bringing about change in attitude, a move away from the *language of differences* (which highlights and perpetuates the distances between groups) towards a language of *inclusion and mutuality* that focuses on challenges and a common approach issues can be a positive step to a change in attitude.

Why isn't school considered relevant by the working class? A curriculum that is not socially and culturally relevant to working class pupils, that presents more barriers than opportunities, will not engage them in learning. The national curriculum in England has been developed based on the knowledge and experience of the middle class. There are solutions to this dilemma that, if implemented, would address the needs of all children.

The first is to break down barriers to learning by providing opportunities for all children to participate in social and cultural activities, sport, the arts, debating, volunteering, wider community-based activities, museum trips and more.

⁵ Blandford, S. (2019), *Social Mobility, Chance or Choice?*, Woodbridge: John Catt Educational

The second requires us to relate the curriculum to the social context of the child and their future. All communities have a rich heritage, which can help shape the curriculum.

Thirdly, we should introduce learning about the workplace in primary school, which will raise ambitions, break down barriers, and provide relevance to learning.

Increasing access to learning for all children should be the benchmark of a successful school.

Why isn't there the will to stop the growth of disadvantage among the working class? Part of the problem is that the context of UK poverty has changed. Poverty is no longer just an issue for people out of work or living in social housing. The drive for welfare reform has been seen as an answer to the problems of disadvantage, but we have failed to understand this changing context and therefore the necessary solutions: better housing, investment in communities – or reinvestment where cuts have decimated good work – and a continued drive to grow employment and provide good jobs that provide an income on or above a living wage.

Why is working class success only measured by exam results? The annual media frenzy that follows SATs and GCSE exam results only serves to remind many of the working-class families that their children are disadvantaged, with private and grammar schools forming the majority at the top of published league tables. The minority of working-class students who do meet national performance measures demonstrates that passing exams is a possibility at primary and secondary, but a lack of social and cultural capital makes this harder.

Why is there a lack of ambition for the working class? There is no evidence that the working class cannot achieve – in education, employment, housing, and health. There is also no evidence that the working class are any less likely to have a desire for success than others. What there is, though, is a lack of societal ambition outside spurious targets (like university entry) that only concern 50 per cent of the population at best. To increase ambition for the working class there needs to be a mutual understanding of what is available in terms of alternatives, and engagement with the working class about what they want. By talking and listening, ambitions can be met – a do with rather than do to approach.

So, are the working class born to fail? the Education Select Committee's report would indicate that rather than reducing the chances of failure within the working class over the last fifty years, we have increased the possibility of failure in housing, education, and social care.

We can change the way we tackle social mobility. Ultimately, it is about taking responsibility, and creating a shared moral purpose, ambition, and integrity, owned by the working class, that can provide the opportunities and resources needed for all children and their families to achieve. This is social justice in action, and possibly, social mobility that really works.

Time for a New Conversation: Mutuality

I do not wish to go back to a time where it was accepted that the playing field was not level and that as a working-class person you had to work twice as hard (and be lucky) to be in with a chance. That was the time I grew up in, and I do not recommend it. But I am not

comfortable with today's reality; when educators talk about levelling the playing field and governments claim that education funding automatically creates opportunity, the reality falls short and betrays those who have signed up to the idea of meritocracy. It betrays everyone.

In my work, I have had the privilege to see and feel the difference social mobility in its best sense can look like, and how everyone can benefit as a result. I have seen employers working with schools to support learning and to showcase the opportunities in their arena. I have seen young people helped into that first job and mentored and supported as they earn and learn and grow. And I have seen universities squaring up to the twin challenges of working-class access to higher education and the numbers of working-class students who drop out of studies.

This kind of thinking is exciting to see and demonstrates mutuality and choice in its finest form.

Mutuality happens when, instead of us thinking about helping children escape the constraints of their class and making judgements about what people from disadvantaged communities need to change, we focus on providing equality of choice. This allows people on all sides of the political spectrum, and from across all classes and cultures, to have their voice heard in the conversation about what happens next, to have a role to play, to value their class and background identities, and own their own change. When we do this, everyone in society benefits.

While access to universities improves and apprenticeships embed in the system allowing more people to realise their potential, we should continually question whether we are identifying and meeting the needs of everyone. What happens to those with no obvious talent who find education challenging? What happens to those who face more challenges than most who fail to get the necessary GCSEs? What opportunities can we offer to ensure life-long learning so there is always a chance to access education and work?

Should we worry less about the different types of schools in the country, and to focus more on how they can work in partnership with each other for their mutual benefit. By doing that we might level the field so all pupils can share in the aspirations and opportunity and sense of entitlement that is experienced in the independent sector.

Like me and so many others now advocating a reappraisal of some very hard-wired assumptions, we need to challenge the idea that social mobility relies on people escaping their circumstances: It says to working-class people that they must leave their culture, the area they have grown up in, the relationships they have forged there so they can move into socially and economically advantaged roles [.....] Surely, we should have a society, a productive society, where we have good jobs in all areas. Regional manufacturing and industrial policies worth their name, and good jobs available in those regions for people when they leave school. Opportunities young people can see in their area to incentivise them.

Those young people are also looking for security and wellbeing and the chance to make a difference. They are also looking for greater educational, social, and economic equality where they learn, live and work. For many young people, economic progression is only part of the story: progression includes improvements in their community, culture, and environment; home life and health; work-life balance and ability to make a difference.

For a moment, consider the gap between the socially and culturally rich and the financially and educationally stuck⁶.

The big question seems to me to be:

Do we care enough to listen to the young people we profess to want to help and include them in a meaningful national conversation about the lives they want for their future?

Can we choose a Better Conversation?

Education policies are often shaped and introduced without a real listening to the educators who know the most about what is happening in schools; or by taking note of evidence from those trying to support them.

The reasons for this are both party political and systemic. The systemic problem, I argue, arises from the traditional response of policy makers to challenge tending to be two-fold: structural or system change; and/or, short-term policy goals.

These responses are understandable in the context of a UK political cycle that naturally tends towards short-term activity and the reality of education policymakers having a limited number of levers available to achieve change.

The missing group at the table is the public: the parents, the carers, the grandparents, the aunts and uncles, the brothers, and sisters; the young people from all walks of life; and the wider community that share of a view of wanting change and who can share solutions.

It is time to challenge the injustice of the current prevailing view of social mobility, that the vulnerable and disadvantaged have somehow failed, and they should become more middle class, pass the required number of exams followed by university. In contrast we should reflect on the thinking and action needed to change if every child is to be included, regardless of their background, challenge or need.

Policy Options

If we are to change, co-ordination across government departments is needed to address the raised by the Select Committee for Education. Departments responsible for education from early years to lifelong learning; housing, health, transport, media, industry and so on all have a part to play in building strong confident communities where young people can stay if they wish and lead fulfilling lives.

I draw the specific Policy Options listed below, from Every Child Included in Education⁷ priorities. At Achievement for All, we have created this collaborative campaign to focus activity and embed change for the benefit of every child and young person.

Policy option 1: Respect and pupil well-being: Promote kindness and wellbeing in education, business and third sector settings, where every child and young person is included every day, addressing mental health, character and resilience through culture and mutual-ity, celebrating tolerance, patience, friendship, creativity, and problem solving.

⁶ <http://www.oecd.org/social/broken-elevator-how-to-promote-social-mobility-9789264301085-en.htm>

⁷ <https://afaeducation.org/media/1489/afa-manifesto-final-2205.pdf>

Policy Option 2: Focus funding on a relevant curriculum: Increase investment across all phases of education, beginning with the early years that results in a socially and culturally relevant curriculum, increasing attainment in reading, writing and maths, enhancing life chances and culminating in a meaningful destination for every child.

Policy Option 3: Teacher training: Put greater focus on teachers as professional learners through recruitment, retention, and professional development that includes an enhanced understanding of the way disadvantaged and vulnerable children learn.

Policy Option 4: Inclusion: Reduce children and young people being excluded in education: increase responsibility for children at risk of exclusion through cross-agency collaboration to reduce exclusions and minimise the number of children and young people at risk, and close the gap for SEND, too often the marginalised and forgotten group.

Policy Option 5: Community engagement: Increase recognition of parents, carers, and wider communities, valuing all parents and carers as crucial partners in the improvement of learning and life chances for every child.

My belief is that these policies can begin to build a foundation for better lives for every white working-class child. All of us, as educators, parents and carers, and members of society must contribute to building this foundation and the real structures for change that will follow. No child should be 'Born to Fail'.

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Born to Fail? Social Mobility: A Working Class View <https://www.johncatt-bookshop.com/born-to-fail>

Social Mobility: Chance or Choice? <https://www.johncattbookshop.com/social-mobility-chance-or-choice>