



Don't assume it's grim up North

Claims that the 'North-South divide' in student attainment is down to poor school leadership and weak teaching could be used to drive the government's 'levelling-up' agenda. But research suggests such arguments may be flawed – and that the real culprit is long-term economic deprivation. **John Morgan** reports ▶

In nearly 20 years as a school leader, Stephen Tierney was never short of things to worry about. There were concerns about whether pupils “might be neglected, whether they might have any heating at home, whether they would have a bed to sleep in or whether they might have any food in the fridge that night”, he explains.

Many heads face similar concerns but Tierney, who retired as CEO of the Blessed Edward Bamber Catholic Multi Academy Trust in 2019 and now chairs the Headteachers’ Roundtable, has arguably experienced them on a greater scale than most.

That’s because he was a school leader in Blackpool, which is home to eight of the 10 most deprived neighbourhoods in the country, according to the government’s 2019 Index of Multiple Deprivation, which ranks around 33,000 neighbourhoods across England.

These levels of deprivation made Tierney’s job more challenging but there was something else that he was simultaneously battling against: a prevailing narrative that northern schools are simply not good enough.

In the 2015 Ofsted annual report, Blackpool figured prominently as being one of 16 areas in England – “all but three...in the North and Midlands” – singled out for having low proportions of schools rated “good” or better, low GCSE attainment and poor performance on a secondary school progress measure.

At the time, Sir Michael Wilshaw, then head of Ofsted, gave voice to what may have already been a common assumption: that a North-South gulf in school performance measures could not be “explained away” by deprivation but was down to a “significant difference in the quality of teaching” and “the quality of leadership”.

Today, not only does this idea of a North-South divide in education still exist, it is freshly relevant, with education possibly coming to the forefront of the “levelling up” agenda – the Conservatives’ core, cross-government priority to improve the lives of voters in northern and Midlands seats where the 2019 election was won.

“There is a realisation, from the conversations we have [with government], that the challenges inherent in levelling up are as much about human capital as they are about physical infrastructure; and, actually, also about culture and aspiration as much as about raw economic inputs; and that schools have a big role to play in that,” says Will Tanner, the director of the “mainstream conservatism” think tank Onward and a former adviser to Theresa May as prime minister.



Tackling the “North-South divide” could be about to become a key part of the government’s push to turn the “levelling up” slogan into policies to improve schools, then. But how far does this divide even exist? And what would any moves to tackle it mean for schools in the North?

To answer those questions, we need to understand where the idea of a North-South divide in school quality came from in the first place. According to Chris Zarraga, director of Schools North East, that idea is “a myth” that really started with the 2015 Ofsted report.

Wilshaw explains that, at the time, regional Ofsted directors and school inspectors in the North were making it apparent to him that “there was a very big divide in standards between the North and the South” – in secondary schools rather than primary.

“There are a number of factors in this but poverty isn’t one of them,” he says. “If it were poverty, then [northern] primary schools would do badly...It’s got to be the quality of leadership, the quality of teaching and the expectation levels of the [secondary] schools.”

“London has deprivation and poverty the way that other parts of the country have deprivation and poverty, but London secondary schools do significantly better.”

Others, however, disagree. Stephen Gorard, director of the Durham University Evidence Centre for Education and professor of education and public policy, observes that such arguments are based partly on Ofsted inspection ratings. But “there’s a high correlation between the nature [social background] of the pupils going into schools

and the Ofsted inspection grades [schools] get...Ofsted hasn’t learnt how to take context out of its inspections,” he says.

Gorard has published research looking at disadvantage and attainment in England using a longitudinal study of an entire age cohort, from age 5 through to 16, finding that the main predictors of attainment at key stage 4 were “poverty and special educational needs at age 5 and throughout schooling, coupled with prior attainment at ages 6, 10, and 13”.

Once “prior attainment and the economic and other challenges faced by the populations” are taken into account, says Gorard, “there’s no evidence at all – I mean absolutely definitively, not at all – that teachers in schools in the North or the West Midlands are doing worse than you would expect”.

Put into context

The “North-South divide” in school education was also the subject of a 2019 report by the Northern Powerhouse Partnership, the business-led group that aims to “transform the northern economy”.

The report looked at the key Progress 8 measure, which considers what happens to pupils’ achievement levels between key stage 2 and GCSE – often cited in identifying what has been deemed to be northern underperformance.

The report was based on a 2016 academic study, led by George Leckie, professor of social statistics and co-director of the Centre for Multilevel Modelling in the University of Bristol’s School of Education. The team built a contextualised Progress 8, which took into account pupils’ ethnicity, English as an additional language status, special educational needs status, free school meals status and residential deprivation.

Leckie and his colleagues found that the “high average Progress 8 score seen in London halves when we adjust for pupil background”, mainly “due to these schools teaching high proportions of high progress ethnic groups” (such as pupils of Chinese, Indian and Bangladeshi heritage, who perform higher than expected on Progress 8 given their prior attainment, while white British and black Caribbean heritage pupils perform lower than expected).

By contrast, “the low average Progress 8 score seen in the North East improves substantially after adjustment due to the high proportions of poor pupils taught in this region”.

The contextualised measure “reveals significantly lower progress being made in London schools” than when judged on raw scores, while some schools in the North are “performing incredibly well” when judged

Could place-based funding ‘level up’ education?

If the government were to back extra funding for schools as part of the levelling-up agenda, there would be a big question: should these policies have place-based elements or should they aim to tackle deprivation more broadly, in whatever area it is found?

The Department for Education has taken a place-based approach on a limited scale via its Opportunity Areas: 12 social mobility

“cold spots” selected for extra support via locally led partnerships, linking all levels of the education system.

An additional £24 million is being pumped into the North East via the Opportunity North East programme, which aims to improve outcomes for secondary students by the end of 2022.

Such schemes contain the “seed of a really good idea”, says Stephen Tierney, chair of the Headteachers’

Roundtable, but there is a need to ensure there is adequate “core budget and then additionality” for schools working in the most deprived areas, he argues.

For example, the Blackpool school he led received “about £2.5 million to £3 million” a year less than a London school “because London schools in the period from 2000 to 2014-15 were...advantaged in the way the funding formula worked”, he explains.

on the contextualised measure, says Frank Norris, education adviser to the Northern Powerhouse Partnership, former chief executive of the Co-op Academies Trust and a former divisional manager for schools and early years at Ofsted.

The FFT Education Datalab has also examined claims of a North-South divide in school quality by building a contextualised Progress 8 measure, taking account of pupils' disadvantage and ethnicity, finding that under this adjusted measure "it does not appear that the performance of local authorities in the North East is much different to those in London".

A key message from Education Datalab analysis is that long-term disadvantaged white British pupils fare poorly on attainment levels whatever region they are taught in, meaning that if a school has high levels of such pupils, "your school is going to do significantly poorer when you look at raw attainment", says Tierney.

In this argument, the context of the economic challenges weighing against some northern schools is everything. And while people like Zarraga argue that there is no North-South divide in teaching quality, "in terms of the underlying geographical issues, there definitely is a North-South divide that has a big impact", he says.

Where does that divide come from? It can be traced back to the decline of the manufacturing, steel and mining industries – concentrated overwhelmingly in the North East, the M62 belt stretching between Liverpool and Hull, plus the East and West Midlands, which have borne the heaviest economic toll from job losses since the 1970s.

That history still casts a long shadow over those areas today: the geographic distribution of tax credit payments for low pay, and incapacity benefit for those unable to work, closely follows the geographic distribution of job losses through de-industrialisation, academics from Sheffield Hallam University's Centre for Regional Economic Social Research have shown.

Many of the 16 North and Midlands areas previously singled out by Ofsted for underperformance are de-industrialised areas: Barnsley, Bradford, Doncaster, Knowsley, Middlesbrough, Oldham, Salford, St Helens and Stoke on Trent. Two more of those areas, Blackpool and Hartlepool, are coastal communities, known to often suffer particular problems of disadvantage.

The loss of jobs in "shipbuilding, coal mining, steelworks, manufacturing – they have left behind huge gaps in communities", explains Zarraga. "What you see in those communities is that the disadvantage gap

in attainment begins very early – it begins before [children] get into school."

Given this context of deprivation, Norris believes that it is "fundamentally wrong to assume that quality of teaching is weaker in some of those communities in the North. It's as if some teachers are driving a nicer car on a better road than other teachers. But we're measuring it as if they are driving the same car on the same track," he says.

And that matters, particularly right now, because the two different accounts of what explains the North-South gap on raw school performance measures – poor teaching and leadership, or deprivation – lead on to very different policy prescriptions for how the government could "level up" education and what that will mean for schools.

Teaching 'not weaker in the North'

A forthcoming report by the Onward think tank – potentially an influential force here, given that its founder, Tory MP Neil O'Brien, has been appointed as the prime minister's levelling up adviser – has looked at the issue in more detail.

Onward's report, co-produced with the New Schools Network, shows that, in terms of "access to 'good' or 'outstanding' [secondary] schools, the North East is way below anywhere else and the North West is second to that," says Francesca Fraser, a researcher at the think tank and report co-author. But it also shows that the North East has good primary attainment and finds that overall, "there's no clear [North-South] divide and it comes down to much smaller geographies", she adds.

Tanner says that while deprivation "is important" in terms of the underlying factors, "it looks a lot more complicated than that" when primary attainment drops off at secondary level in the same areas, suggesting that "structural questions around governance, leadership and teaching quality" are key factors.

Onward's policy recommendations focus on using successful multi-academy trusts "as an engine of school improvement" and incentivising them to "take on underperforming schools" where they have a track record of doing that successfully, says Tanner, citing examples in the North, such as the Star Academies and Outwood Grange Academies trusts.

Where there is "stubborn underperformance over many, many years, in extremis there is a case for closing down that school and effectively creating a new school in its place – and using the free school movement as the mechanism for creating that new school," he continues. "We think those are the types



of things that are likely to get a good hearing in government."

Meanwhile, among those who see economic deprivation as the overwhelming factor in the North-South gap, funding is key.

Gorard has published evidence showing the success of the pupil premium in reducing social segregation in schools and improving relative attainment for poor pupils, including in the North. But he argues that the premium should be "calibrated more for the duration of that poverty", towards the long-term disadvantaged (pupils who receive free school meals for the majority of their time in school rather than shorter periods).

If the government "did calibrate pupil premium more towards long-term disadvantage...it would disproportionately go to areas like the West Midlands, the North East, some parts of the North West, where the need is greatest," says Gorard.

In addition, Tierney thinks it imperative that the Department for Education reverses its recent decision to shift the free school meal pupils count to October, which means "tens of thousands of pupils have been missed out...To me, that's just absolutely immoral because those schools are not going to have

the funding to support those children," he says.

Zarraga agrees that extra funding for long-term disadvantaged pupils is needed but also calls for greater action to "support the North East teaching profession at every possible level", which would offer a "far greater incentive" to get good teachers "into the most disadvantaged schools, particularly at senior leader level", where he warns a "high-stakes accountability system" is deterring teachers from taking leadership roles in the schools most challenged by deprivation.

Tanner, likewise, believes that "it is necessary for the government to be thinking about more systemic approaches to getting great teachers in those schools".

Ultimately, the question of what levelling up will mean for northern schools will come down to what extent the government sees teaching quality, or economic deprivation, as the root of the North-South gulf in raw school performance.

Which side they come down on remains to be seen. Yet there will also be those who question whether any North-South divide that exists in education can be bridged from Whitehall at all.

Many northern school leaders may argue that what we really need is a shift in power, so that the people who are making the decisions about how to improve northern schools are the people who truly understand the problems that these schools are facing, from first-hand experience.

Lack of northern voices

Helen Rafferty, interim chief executive of SHINE, a charity working with schools across the North to raise the attainment of disadvantaged children, believes that one of the benefits of boosting and recalibrating pupil premium towards long-term disadvantage, for instance, would be that this would "really draw on the expertise of schools, their knowledge of their communities and their local context, rather than policy being very Westminster-led or very top down".

Zarraga says that the voices driving policy are "primarily from the south" and often "don't understand the regional context, the data and the impact of long-term deprivation – in my view, it drives incorrect policy."

Norris agrees: "I definitely am sick and tired now of southern solutions being the answer to the North," he says.

Instead, he advocates for education powers being devolved to the level of regional mayors, creating regional education boards that he thinks could create "better value and a more integrated, targeted approach".

At the same time, however, Tierney believes that in the most deprived areas, like Blackpool, there's a need to look "more broadly than schools" and introduce policies to "reduce poverty" in housing, social services and the economy. "You can't purely solve it through education," he argues.

Tackling the North-South divide in schools may therefore involve recognising the limits of what schools policy can achieve on its own – and putting in place regional economic policies to help foster good jobs and a sense that education can lead on to something valuable and transformative.

Yet it may also require explicit acknowledgement that the problem is not only an issue of the gap between North and South but of the disconnect that exists between government and those working in schools – a disconnect that exists between Whitehall and Blackpool. ●
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