

Northern Workhouse – Debra Kidd (blog)

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There's been another North/South divide [report](#) out recently (May 2016) pointing out that children do worse in the North than in London. Well except in primary. Primary kids do quite well. And in Warrington and Trafford. The report pauses here to consider how it might be that these two boroughs do better than, say Oldham. I could have saved them a bit of time. Two words. House prices. Cheshire is posh innit? I mean there are, as there are anywhere, pockets of poverty. But in Oldham, the trousers are made out of poverty with a couple of pockets of affluence up there in Saddleworth.

Still, let's not be picky. The North does worse than London. London used to be shocking apparently, but now things have improved. Two words. House prices. Have you seen those images of how the demographic of London has shifted due to rising rental and property prices? It's shocking. Move the poorest out, educational outcomes go up. Teach First claim credit.

Then there's the immigration factor. People say those words like they're obvious. Hmm, yes the 'immigration factor'. Thing is Oldham has plenty of immigrants. But like any aspect of human life, race isn't a straightforward issue. Class impacts on race. London has more educated, highly aspirational immigrants and refugees who value education. They may be poor, but theirs is situational poverty – a form of poverty that sees a potential future which is more affluent. For them, education is part of the journey to that future. That's not to say poor white or immigrant families do not value education, but first generation immigrant communities who risked a great deal to leave home and travel to the UK for a better life, are far more likely to push their children than second or third generation immigrant communities dealing with generational poverty, disaffection and racial tensions. In these largely Bangladeshi and Pakistani communities, Islamophobia is a real and present danger. It's hard to trust an education system in a society that seems to view your religion as a form of radicalisation. Barriers build up between communities and schools and these make learning harder for children. As one 8 year old Muslim child told my son in an 'intercultural' visit between their two schools:-

“People ask me if I have a bomb in my back pack. They don't like us.”

Then of course, there's the issue of funding. The IPPR report rightly points out that London schools get more money than those in the North. This in spite of the fact that for the kids in London, public transport is free. Here, kids have to pay £5 just for the right to get a pass that entitles them to child fares. And even then, the fares are extortionate. Ask a teacher in the North why they take so few school trips and they'll point to the cost of transport. In London, that's not an issue. Nor is access to a plethora of free cultural experiences and an enriching array of architecture and history on the doorstep.

Still, the report is upbeat about the answers. More CPD for teachers and more TeachFirst. Now I can see, even in a recruitment crisis, young graduates beating a door to work in London for a couple of years before getting a job in a bank. But Oldham? Don't get me wrong. I live here and love it. But it's not a big draw for a 21 year old with a first in Maths from Oxford is it? Not even the brass bands contest can pull them in. Instead, why don't we look at what we already have here? The existing teachers who have worked here for years, dealing with every funding cut, every shifting goalpost, every increase in child mental health issues, every hideous situation arising from poverty and disaffection you can imagine...why not invest in those who are here and who already know? Those who say "what we need are more resources, the freedom to take these kids out of their field of experience and show them how amazing other places, times, cultures can be. What we need is time to embed change before the next one swoops in. What we need is a recognition that contacts matter, that aspiration can only occur when role models are present."

For a child growing up in London in particular, where the classes are unusually integrated, it is not unusual to see someone in a suit walk down your street. In some parts of the North, only the bailiff wears a suit. It's hard to imagine being a doctor or a lawyer or a rocket scientist if you never meet one. It's why I love the work of the Opportunity Network in New York. Established by Jessica Pliska, it recognises that the biggest barriers for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, are not academic success, but contacts and confidence. The network arranges placements, internships, visits to universities and work places, mentoring, work shadowing, mock interviews and a whole host of other opportunities to young people. It's incredibly successful. It's what we need. A Northern Role Model and Mentoring House.

The gap here is not simply in education. It's in town planning. In infrastructure. In housing. In the jobs market. In networking. If we can get those right, education will be able to do its job. With the people already there, in schools, doing it but having the road to success finally cleared for them. We really are in this together if we want it to work.

Question: what this article suggests is that poverty of funding and cultural access is blocked to educational achievement. How will staying in or out of the EU affect this?