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Pocket Watch – Tackling the attainment gap

Introduction

Two Ofsted Reports in as many weeks, let alone a further Report on social mobility in the HE sector, suggest that the issue of closing the attainment gap for pupils from disadvantaged areas remains a high priority. It's not a new problem and as the Ofsted Reports indicate, the mix of pupils, let alone the geographic regions most affected may have changed over the years but the extent of the problem has not: *"roughly 20% of the nation's children and young people are getting a raw deal."* The Government has staked much of its reputation on improving this situation and schools have not been short of advice as a result so what's being proposed?

The two Ofsted Reports

The most comprehensive of the two was the latest **study** into access and achievement, a long-term piece of work, undertaken by the inspectorate looking at the issue of disadvantaged children. Previous Reports in 1993 and 2003 painted a pretty depressing picture and while evidence in some parts remains bleak, the tone now was more optimistic: *"we are beginning to learn the lessons of good practice."* There is some impressive data in this Report which help pinpoint many of the issues and suggest that while there's been some improvement at primary level, there hasn't at secondary with the attainment gap last year between better and worse off pupils by Key Stage 4 *"remaining stubbornly at 27%."* The Report lists eight recommendations with the creation of a dedicated field force of experienced teachers, 'National Service Teachers,' ready to leap into areas of greatest need, being the most eye catching. Others include:

- The development of sub-regional challenges, a bit like the old London Challenge, to home in on particularly disadvantaged parts of the country
- A need to change the assessment approach for early years and potentially introduce progress measures from the start of school to the end of KS1. At the other end of the scale, post-16 providers should report on the progress and outcomes of all those who had been eligible for free school meals
- A stronger approach towards FE: *"government should be prepared to dismantle inadequate colleges that have grown too large and create smaller, specialist units"*
- A tougher line from Ofsted: *"schools previously judged outstanding, which are not doing well by their poorest children, will be re-inspected"*

The other **Report** looked at most able pupils and how successfully these were being stretched and challenged in schools. Again there were some depressing stats and the Report called for more streaming and setting and more challenge for KS3 where pupils *"tread water"*

HE: The Fair Access Challenge

This **Report** from the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission looks at what progress has been made since its last year's Report on getting more students from disadvantaged backgrounds into university, in particular leading Russell Group universities. It was unimpressed, citing a slight percentage drop over the last decade. This remains a subject of intense debate with the Report calling for clearer targets, more use of contextual data in the admissions process and, significantly, urgent action to improve the use of the National Scholarship Programme

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Closing the gap June 2013