Education, investment and social change

How does the UK compare to the rest of the world in terms of spending on education? Does this figure condemn poorer children to low standards?

UK political parties and education spending

In the general election of 2015 only one main political party pledged to protect spending on schools and colleges in real terms: it was the Liberal Democrats. Perhaps they were hoping to get the UK higher up the international education investment table (Figure 1).

- Labour promised to raise the schools budget in line with inflation — but not in line with the expected 300,000 more primary pupils to be enrolled by 2018.
- The Conservatives promised to ‘protect’ the schools budget — but with no account taken of inflation.
- The Lib Dems pledged to commit an additional £2.5bn of funding for 2- to 19-year-olds in education by 2020: extra money for smaller tuition groups and more new teachers to cope with rising pupil numbers.

However, promising more money for schools does not seem to be a major vote winner in the UK today: the Liberal Democrats lost 49 of their 57 parliamentary seats.

Parental achievement = child achievement

A recent Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) briefing paper on education and lack of social mobility in the UK points less to education spending, and more to the correlation between parental education and children’s achievement — which is very high by international standards. According to OECD figures, fewer than four out of ten young people in the UK, for example, outperform the educational achievements of their parents (Figure 2).

The ESRC recommends that child poverty and social mobility strategies should tackle what they call the ‘multiple structural problems’ (low-quality teaching, exclusions, schools’ failure to address bullying, as well as lower school funding in poorer areas) which currently prevent poorer children in the UK from achieving their full educational potential.

Raising attainment for poorer children

In March 2015 Alan Milburn, the Chair of the UK Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission said there was ‘something going badly wrong’ when low-ability children from wealthy UK families overtake high-ability children from poorer families during school. Poorer children who achieve excellent results in primary schools fall behind more advantaged students with similar results during secondary.

For many decades, he argued, it was accepted by government and the public that better-off children would naturally excel, while poorer kids would naturally fall behind. But OECD evidence from countries as different as Canada, Poland and Singapore shows these countries now have a good track record in raising the attainment level of their poorest children. The OECD researchers divided students into quartiles based on the parents’ income, wealth, education level and occupation. They then calculated the percentage of students from the bottom of the ladder nationally who end up at the top globally in academic achievement (Figure 3). The UK is very far behind the leaders here — but this comparison also makes clear that poverty should no longer be regarded as educational destiny.

Note: Expenditure on education as a percentage of total public expenditure in selected countries

Source: OECD

Figure 1 Which countries invest the most in education?

Note: Percentage of 25-64 year olds whose educational attainment is higher than that of their parents

Source: OECD Education at a Glance 2014

Figure 2 Educational mobility leaves room for improvement