

Is there a north-south divide between schools in England?

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Abstract

The article is an opinion piece which examines the extent to which rhetoric about a north-south divide in performance between schools in England is justified. Starting with the catalyst, Sir Michael Wilshaw's final annual Ofsted reports in 2015 and 2016, it traces how the divide rhetoric has been assimilated into popular discourse by the media and subsequent policy reports, notably in connection with the Northern Powerhouse agenda. The article uses regional school performance data to examine whether claims about the divide are convincing, focusing on the North East which has been recognised as an outlier in both primary and secondary performance. It concludes that the case for a north-south divide is not proven and with an appeal for more contextually sensitive and flexible approaches to assessing local, regional and national school performance to counter the negative effects of this divisive rhetoric.

Keywords

North-south divide, school performance, accountability, regions, North East.

In her recently published book *To Throw Away Unopened* (2018), Viv Albertine writes of the 1950s and 1960s that 'British culture was simple and binary back then. There were two choices in most spheres in my life [...] Everything was black or white, or black and white'. Although her implication is that things have changed, binary oppositions (us-them, leave-remain) are if anything even more ubiquitous now. Perhaps it is the speed and complexity of the contemporary world that makes them so seductive. One such opposition is the notion of the North-South divide in England. The idea of a divide between the North and the South in England goes back at least as far as the rapid industrialization of the 19th century (Baker and Billinge, 2004), although there has never been consensus about where the dividing line lies. Coventry, Leicester and more surprisingly Sheffield tend to be border cities, switching sides depending on the data that is used to define it. Of course, this not just an English phenomenon. In Germany, for example, prosperity is greater and crime rates are lower in the South (*Economist*, 2017), although this overlooks the lingering effects of its East-West divide. A similar pattern of greater prosperity in the south can also be found in India and Vietnam. What all these divides have in common is that our desire for simple opposition prevents more nuanced recognition of the complexity that lies behind variations in regional culture, prosperity or wellbeing. This article explores the validity and effects of one of these oppositions, the so-called north-south divide between English schools.

The notion of a north-south divide was applied to schools in England when Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills, Sir Michael Wilshaw, identified in his 2015 annual report (Ofsted, 2015: 9) '*nothing short of a divided nation after the age of 11*' between schools in the North and the Midlands (grouping these two geographical areas together) and those in the South. In 2016, he declared that the gap had widened and '*more than a quarter of secondaries in the North and Midlands are still not good enough*' (Ofsted, 2016: 11).

By 2017, the notion of a north-south divide between schools in England had been assimilated into popular discourse. Although Wilshaw was careful to refer throughout the reports to 'the North and the Midlands', the media headlines that followed his reports simply highlighted a north-south divide between England's schools, failed to differentiate between primary and secondary performance and lost the Midlands entirely. This has been perpetuated by the emerging Northern Powerhouse agenda, a government initiative launched in 2014 to boost economic growth in the North of England. For example, in their review of evidence on education in the North of England for the Northern Powerhouse Partnership (NPP), Tate and Greatbach (2016: 5) stated in their key findings that: *'The literature was clear that there is a disparity between school performance in the North compared with other regions, even when relative socio-economic disadvantage is taken into account'*. However, in the corresponding section in the report itself, the only literature referenced is Wilshaw's 2015 report and a distinction is made between primary and secondary education, which was lost in the headline findings. The first NPP report (2017: 20) also implied the divide pervaded all phases of education: *'The roots of [underperformance in Northern secondary schools] this go back to early years and we need to understand more about how this affects attainment at age 16, but too many secondary schools appear to be underperforming'*.

The issue has not gone away, as two reports which have already appeared in 2018 demonstrate. The first, published by NPP in February, focused on education in the North and highlighted the importance of investment in the early years to address the North's high deprivation levels, while also perpetuating some of the earlier reports' generalisations about school performance. The second, from the Children's Commissioner for England and published in March with the confusing title *Growing Up North*, examines children's experiences of living in the North of England. A wide-ranging report, addressing children and young people's experience from pre-school through to post-16 education and employment, its recommendations include increasing investment into highly disadvantaged areas and focusing on reducing school drop-out. However, the evidence provided to support familiar claims that the gap between disadvantaged and less-disadvantaged children widens throughout education and that leadership in Northern schools is weak is less convincing. It also focuses rather too much on comparisons with schools in London, which as we will see is at best misleading and at worst damaging for schools located elsewhere.

All this underlines the fact that Wilshaw's more considered identification of a difference in schools' Ofsted ratings has become received wisdom, with neither the data on which it was based nor its lack of concern with schools' social, economic and cultural contexts being questioned sufficiently. In this article, I consider whether the claims made in these reports are justified, focusing on schools in the North East of England because they have increasingly bucked the regional trend in school performance, both positively and negatively.

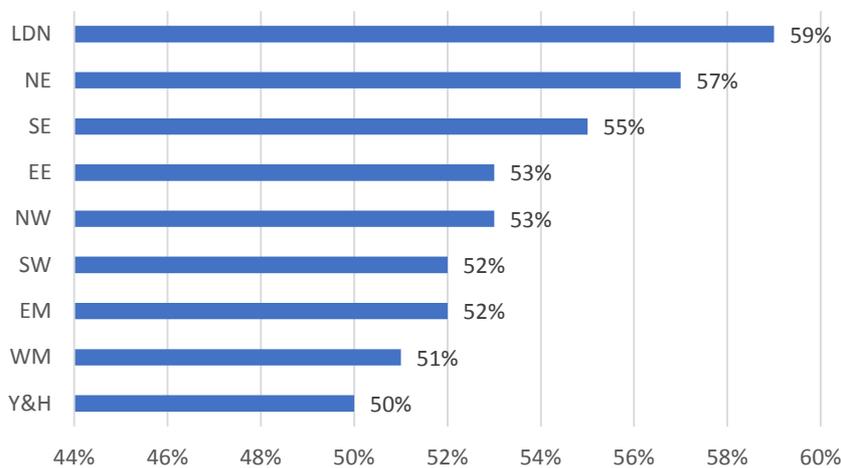
How convincing is the evidence for a north-south divide between schools?

The data used to identify the north-south divide in Wilshaw's two annual reports (Ofsted, 2015; 2016) were school ratings from Ofsted, the inspection and ratings agency for education in England. Tables for primary and secondary schools in the annexes of the two reports simply indicated the percentage of pupils in schools rated 'good' or 'outstanding' at

the time of reporting. (No such tables were included in the 2017 report.) Conventionally, regional analysis uses England’s nine Government Office Regions. In the reports, the North East and Yorkshire and Humberside regions were grouped together for reasons which were not explained, which resulted in schools in this ‘region’ being ranked fifth out of eight regions in terms of primary schools and sixth for secondaries in 2016. When the North East was separated from Yorkshire and Humberside, primary schools in the region were ranked third, with 92.4 per cent of its children in good or outstanding schools, closely behind London (93.3%) and the North West (93.0%). So much for a north-south divide. The North East was ranked fifth in terms of secondary schools, ahead of the other regions in the North and the Midlands and, at 76.9 per cent, only one per cent behind the South East. Wilshaw’s binary divide was further undermined when the North East data were examined by local authority. As would be expected in a large region with complex patterns of disadvantage and economic neglect, outcomes varied considerably. The fact that the difference was so great between authorities suggests that we should also be focusing on divides within regions as well as those between regions.

Although Wilshaw’s original identification of the divide relied on school’s Ofsted ratings, many of the reports that followed also examined school performance data. Figure 1 illustrates data from the Key Stage 2 assessments which children take in England at age 10-11 at the end of primary education. It shows that at for 2016, the year in which Wilshaw identified a growing divide, primary schools in the North East came second (after London) in terms of the percentage of pupils reaching expected standards in reading, writing and maths combined in 2016.

Figure 1. *Percentage of pupils reaching the expected standards in reading, writing and maths combined at Key Stage 2 by region in 2016* (adapted from Hayes & Gul, 2017)



This outcome was mirrored in the progress scores for the three subjects individually in 2016 and in the 2017 data. Given that the ‘early years gap’ between children from wealthy and poor homes in achieving a ‘good level of development’ has been said to be almost twice as large in the North of England compared to London (Clifton Round and Raikes, 2016), this suggests that many primary schools in the North East in particular have achieved something remarkable in overcoming what the NPP and Children’s Commissioner’s reports (both 2018)

emphasised were the highest levels of disadvantage in England. However, this achievement is obscured by the north-south divide's almost exclusive focus on secondary schools.

Is the progress made in primary schools in many parts of the north maintained after that? 2016 marked the first application of the two new measures at Key Stage 4, when secondary students take GCSE examinations at age 15-16. Attainment 8 measures the achievement of a student across eight qualifications. Progress 8 is a value-added measure that adjusts students' Attainment 8 scores for their prior attainment from Key Stage 2. As a result, secondary schools in the North East appeared at the bottom of the regional list on both measures. In fact, all regions in the North and Midlands had negative Progress 8 scores in 2016 and all other regions were far below London. This suggests that the headlines are correct and there is a north-south divide at secondary level, but may also imply that the new measures are problematic. However, while schools in the North East and North West remained the lowest-performing regions in Progress 8 in 2017, Yorkshire and the Humber was second only to London, suggesting that the picture is more volatile than has been claimed. This suggests two questions: What might explain the apparent disparity in performance between primaries and secondaries in the North and North East in particular and why are we not talking about a divide in performance between primary and secondary schools?

Explaining the disparity between primary and secondary school performance in parts of the North

There are a number of factors which may explain the apparent disparity between primary and secondary performance, most of which are obscured when complex data is reduced to crude comparisons of large geographical regions. Here, I refer to three interdependent factors: levels of school funding, levels of disadvantage, and the ways in which school performance is measured.

Until recently, differences in school funding have been overlooked when schools in other regions are compared to those in London in particular. The dedicated schools grant for 2017-18 reveals that funding per pupil in Tower Hamlets in London was £6,965, whereas in Northumberland it was only £4,248. Clifton Round and Raikes (2016: 31) estimated that in 2016 Northern secondary schools received on average £1,300 less per student per year than schools in London. The impressive improvements in school performance in London from 2003 (Hayes & Gul, 2017) were not achieved on current levels of school funding, which prompts understandable complaints from school leaders in the North when they are castigated for failing to match London schools' performance.

As the reports already cited repeatedly emphasise, data shows that levels of disadvantage are consistently higher in the North. Although for reasons including differences in ethnic and cultural diversity, prosperity and public funding, comparisons of school performance between London and other regions are usually somewhere between unhelpful and misleading, analysis of the so-called 'London effect', according to which school performance in London improved significantly from 2003, actually helps here. Greaves, McMillan and Sibieta (2014: 7) found that the achievement gap between rich and poor was much narrower in London than in the rest of the country for two reasons: because children from deprived backgrounds performed better and due to prior attainment at Key Stage 2:

This suggests that the big improvement over the last decade in FSM [free school meals] results in London and other big cities is unlikely to have been driven by secondary schools, as was previously thought. Instead, the roots are likely to lie in primary schools.

This was echoed by Blanden et al. (2015) who also suggested that the improvement might be explained in part by the fact that disadvantaged pupils in London were much less likely to have a White British background (the lowest performing ethnic group) than in other parts of England. We do not know why primary schools in the North East in particular seem to be better at countering disadvantage than secondaries, but we do know that there are higher levels of White British disadvantage and lower numbers of other ethnic groups in the North. This appears to have had a greater effect at secondary level. The NPP report (NPP, 2018: 17) offers a surprising explanation:

The transition from primary to secondary school may go some way to explaining this apparent decline in attainment in the North East and the lack of effective collaboration between institutions and teachers across both stages is key. In some primary schools when preparing children for [Key Stage 2], there is little or no focus on encouraging more independent learning as required in secondary education.

There is no evidence provided for these assertions and the report is not clear about its qualitative sample. However, it seems bizarre to blame the North East's high performing primary schools for the perceived failures of their secondaries, especially given the evidence from London about the enduring positive effect of primary attainment, which the report also cites.

The third factor is the ways in which school performance is measured. Both the other factors also play a role here. While the introduction of Progress 8 has been welcomed by some, concerns have been raised about its fairness when it is used to assess schools with large proportions of disadvantaged students (Andrews, 2017) because it does not take disadvantage into account. Despite Tate and Greatbach's (2016) odd claim that socio-economic disadvantage plays no role, research examining the effects of disadvantage at Key Stage 4 in 2015 found that there was no difference between local authorities tested in the North East and England as a whole (Gorard, 2017). Like Andrews (2017), Gorard criticises commentators who use raw scores or progress measures to make comparisons without taking into account differences in school intakes, levels of disadvantage, or school funding. This suggests that the notion of a north-south divide among secondary schools can be explained in part by differences in students' backgrounds. Moreover, in the North East in particular and in contrast to areas like London, secondaries may effectively be the victims of primaries' success in that their failure to maintain the progress made by the end of Key Stage 2 is magnified by the Progress 8 measure. However, what is clear is that we still do not know enough about the apparently differential effects of both funding and disadvantage on primary and secondary performance. More research is needed to examine this and the measures we use to assess it.

There are a number of implications that emerge from all this. The first is that the 'statistical' evidence that there is a north-south divide in school performance is not proven and needs to be challenged. Such challenge will benefit from focusing more clearly on

variations in performance within and across regions, rather repeating generalised condemnations of regional under-performance. Blaming primaries for the perceived failure of secondaries seems particularly unhelpful. The second implication is that it is also important to develop new, broader and more contextually sensitive approaches to assessing schools' and young people's performance and development, which more effectively address the effects and complexities of local and regional contexts. The failure to take key contextual factors into account will only perpetuate and extend cycles of disadvantage and failure. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, qualitative research I conducted in the North East highlighted the deleterious effects of the divide rhetoric on morale among school staff, children and young people in the North. Just as negative depictions of local areas are quickly absorbed into received wisdom and used to create hierarchies of disadvantage, negative characterisations of regions can affect self-esteem and self-realisation on a large scale. This is why it is vital to counter crude binary oppositions such as the north-south divide, which distract us from focusing us on more important issues such as finding better ways to support children and young people to learn and develop.

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