



New Perspectives

TOGETHER FOR THE
COMMON GOOD

Meetup 11 May 2020

The New Perspectives Network, the youth branch of Together for the Common Good, held their second Zoom discussion group on 11 May. For this discussion we explored education, class and genuine opportunity. The session was led by Joe Moore whose briefing notes are shared here.

Education and class: breaking down the barriers

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE HAVE TO SAY ON EDUCATION?

The idea of 'education' can be found throughout the Bible. Just a couple of verses of scripture that reference it are:

- Proverbs 18:15 – *"The mind of the prudent acquires knowledge, and the ear of the wise seeks knowledge."*
- Ecclesiastes 7:12 – *"For the protection of wisdom is like the protection of money, and the advantage of knowledge is that wisdom preserves the life of they who have it."*

But we also have a warning against education being our only focus:

- Ecclesiastes 12:12 - *But beyond this, my son, be warned: the writing of many books is endless, and excessive devotion to books is wearying to the body."*

But we also know that education was not the be-all and end-all - many of the disciples themselves were unable to write.

Much of the early biblical understanding of education came in the form of the parents educating their children, with more specialist and deeper legal and theological education taking place in the synagogues – or in the courts of kings for those who could afford it (who did not have to worry about the basic necessities of food and security), such as Daniel’s 3 year education in Babylon. A better education was therefore available to those who were better off, and in this sense education has existed in the form of home schooling or private provision for millennia.

Nonetheless, it could also be said that individuals throughout the Bible were often equipped for the tasks they were called to with a very specific and tailored “education”. The importance of teaching itself is steeped in the history of Judeo-Christian thought, whether it was Moses instructing his people, many of the prophets in the Old Testament, the disciples, or Jesus himself.

The Great Commission at the end of the Gospel of Matthew stresses the importance of teaching to the world!

A more institutionalised form of education which was viewed as essential to human wellbeing and the ‘common good’, came to the fore across the board in recent church history. The reformer John Calvin was a strong advocate for universal education, believing that every person should be trained in reading, writing and maths. The renowned theologian and philosopher, John Locke also advocated reading and writing, as well as geography, astronomy, drawing and critical thinking – and advocated the setting up of schools for poor children – founded on the belief that all are created in the image of God. Finally, the leading figure of the reformation, Martin Luther, taught that education – both religious and non-religious – was essential, in his words “both to understand the Word of Scripture and the nature of the world in which the Word would take root”.

Questions:

- *As Christians what do we consider to be our basis for the importance of education and why?*

How does the ‘Common Good’ relate to education and how does one’s education reflect in society?

At the very basic level of a definition of the common good, the encyclopaedia Britannica cites it as something which ‘benefits society as a whole, in contrast to the private good of individuals and specific sections of society.’ A healthy society is one where people live their lives as citizens deeply embedded in social relationships, rather than in isolation from one another.

This raises some interesting questions when it comes to the idea of private-state education, privilege, and opportunities.

According to the Sutton Trust and Social Mobility Commission (2019):

- **7%** of the population have attended private school
- **5%** of the population have attended grammar school
- **88%** of the population have attended state school

Across the charitable sector (the sector in which I work), it can often be the case that 60%+ of staff are privately educated, and this figure is even higher once you remove those staff who work in general functions (such as finance, HR and fundraising). If we compare this to other sectors of influence, we can see a pattern.

Again, here are some stats from the Sutton Trust and Social Mobility Commission:

- 65% of the UK's senior judges are privately educated
- 65% of those in the current government's cabinet are privately educated
- 59% of permanent secretaries are privately educated
- 52% of diplomats are privately educated
- 48% of FTSE 350 CEOs who were schooled in the UK, were privately educated
- 45% of public body chairs are privately educated
- 44% of newspaper columnists are privately educated

At a broader level – as defined by the same report (Elitist Britain 2019), 59% of those who have attended private school or grammar schools work in positions of high prestige and wealth, with substantial power and influence over people's lives. The sectors the report includes in its definition of 'elite' are, business, politics, public bodies, and the media. These figures are dramatic and even more significant when we remember that only 12% of the population have attended private schools or grammar schools.

So for recap that is 12% of the population working in 59% of high prestige, influential and powerful roles.

Anthony Selden, an educator known for his political biographies, made an interesting point in the British Social Attitudes Private Education Study in 2010, describing independent schools as

"detached from the mainstream of the national education system, thereby perpetuating an apartheid which has so dogged education and national life in Britain since the Second World War".

I realise these are strong words, but I believe they get to a deeper point. I would argue that this is because whilst society might talk about breaking down the barriers, it is not actually breaking down barriers at all.

This same study goes on to say that

'Ironically, rather than blurring the boundaries of 'social apartheid', it is quite possible that increasing gender equality will simply augment the privately-educated elite that already exists in positions of power.'

In other words whilst visually, society might seem to be breaking down barriers of inequality in terms of race and gender – it does not really change things if those who run everything look different but have been cut from the same cloth of privilege in the education opportunities and experiences they have had. This is further supported by evidence in the same study that

'ethnic minorities and woman are as likely to have been privately educated as men and those not from an ethnic minority'.

When the evidence above is extrapolated onto society as a whole, all functions key to the running of our country (legislative, judiciary, business, executive, media) are dominated at a massively disproportionate level by a tiny 7-12% subset of society who have benefited from a highly privileged education. This matters significantly.

Question:

- *Does the privilege that private education provides (and with the expectation that things should be better) allow room for the Common Good to multiply to the benefit of all?*

How do the differences in education impact society?

Is it the case that the focus on appearance and being seen to look representative over the years has created a society in which true representation of both experience and thought does not actually exist? In which are there 'two tiers'? (to coin a phrase from a recent Oxford University Union debate on education).

The early years of our lives are the most formative in setting us up for how we approach the world and the place that we spend most of our childhood is school, so this period of education (whether private or state) will have major ramifications for the rest of our lives (whether good or bad).

In fact, it is white working-class boys at state school who are found to be the worst performing of all categories in education, ensuring a more challenging set up in future career prospects and opportunities. These same boys are the subset (proportional to their number) that are least likely to be found in the boardrooms, newsrooms, embassies, and parliament itself – inevitably meaning their voices are not heard. Despite being white and male, they are further prevented from breaking into this societally perceived 'upper tier'.

It should also be remembered that further divergences are found when factoring in university education, with 2019 being the first (and only) year so far in which more school students have gone to university than not.

A sizable majority of the working population (including those in the 18-30 category) have not actually been to university, again causing a majority to be factored out of policy decisions and positions of influence in business, politics etc etc.

Patrick Riordan SJ argues in *Thinking Faith* that

'The similarity in voting patterns in the recent UK and USA elections suggests that education may be functioning, not as a public good and therefore a real asset to common life, but as a club hardening division and reinforcing the advantages of an elite.'

The impact of Covid-19

This division could be further exacerbated in the unprecedented environment we currently find ourselves in, with many private schools being robust in their provision of online lessons for a full school day, where students have access to a device and space at home in which they can learn. Naturally, nothing less should be expected for the £17,000 per year average that parents pay to send a child to private school for a year.

Meanwhile, state schools struggle to cope with having to both take care of the children of key workers, and offer online lessons to students – many of whom do not have access to their own device and/or space in which to learn – severely limiting the amount of work they can do.

It has been estimated by the Sutton Trust that students in private schools are at least twice as likely to be receiving multiple online lessons every day. TeacherTapp, an app which collects data from over 6,000 state school teachers across the UK found after the first 3 weeks of lockdown in the UK, it was estimated that around 30% of state school students were doing less than 1 hour's work a day (comparable to the 5 hours they would do plus homework pre-coronavirus).

With the likelihood schools will not return properly until September, this will undoubtedly widen the gap in education and exacerbate the societal divides which will come from this, with knock on effects for generations to come.

Questions:

- *Does private education benefit society as a whole? Or does it perpetuate inequality and benefit a small number of people at the expense of others?*
- *How do we as Christians step into a divided education system?*

Reading:

Education: A public good and a common good <https://www.thinkingfaith.org/articles/education-public-good-and-common-good>

The Oxford Student Debate: Private Schools should be Abolished

<https://www.oxfordstudent.com/2019/10/15/private-schools-should-be-abolished/>

The Oxford Student Debate: Private Schools shouldn't be Abolished

<https://www.oxfordstudent.com/2019/10/15/private-schools-shouldnt-be-abolished/>

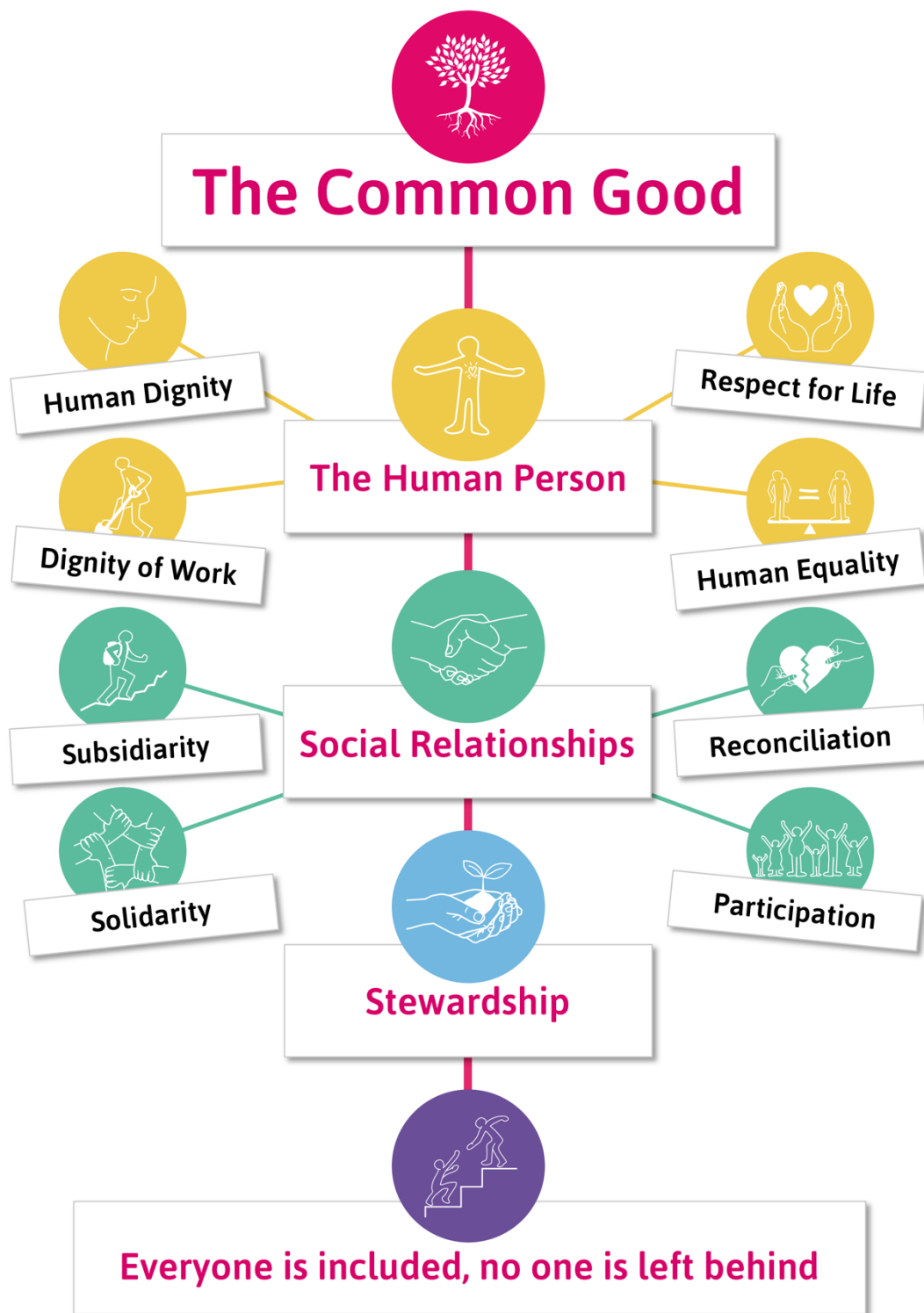
Elitist Britain 2019: The Educational background of Britain's leading people (Report)

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/811045/Elitist_Britain_2019.pdf

British Social Attitudes: Private Education (Study – 2010)

https://www.bsa.natcen.ac.uk/media/38965/bsa28_3private_education.pdf

Four Thought – Socially Mobile? (podcast) <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/bogghmg1>



For more on Common Good Thinking and principles, go to:

<https://togetherforthecommongood.co.uk/about/common-good-thinking>