

successful white boys, of british origin, eligible for free school meals

phase 1: research and implications to date

The background

The Schools Network funded a preliminary programme of research into the achievement of white boys of British origin eligible for free school meals a little over 18 months ago. Mindful of the statistics concerning this demographic and of the work that had been done, and continues to be done, by governments and others, we decided on a novel approach: to concentrate on those boys who had succeeded in bucking the trend - those in this group that had gained at least five good GCSE grades.¹ We believed that the experiences of these boys could help future cohorts to succeed.

The research was designed to allow the students to speak for themselves. We adopted an ethnographic approach: fifty boys who had 'bucked the trend' were identified in different types of schools all over England. Each boy was interviewed at length, and was allowed to set the agenda of the discussion to a large extent. These interviews were then transcribed and, through several close readings of this rich and unique data set, several themes emerged that recurred, in some form or another, across the stories of the majority of the interviewees. These stories and themes are sometimes confirming, often surprising, but certainly contain a clear set of pointers for educators to note and act upon if the achievement of this whole demographic is to be raised.

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¹ Defined as 5 or more A*-C grades at GCSE, including English and Maths

Introduction

Amidst a general rise in GCSE attainment in recent decades, significant gaps have remained. Some gaps have narrowed – the overall achievement of Black Caribbean students, for example, improved rapidly in the early 2000s – but others have persisted. The Government wishes to narrow gaps in achievement between those in receipt of free school meals and other students. For example, it is targeting extra funds through a pupil premium at such students. New league table measures will assess the impact of such measures in individual schools.

Beyond social and ethnic differences in attainment, there is also a significant gender gap: boys perform less well than girls in most subjects. Early indications from the 2011 GCSE data suggest that this gap may even be widening: 73.5% of exams taken by girls were awarded A*-C grades compared with 66% of those taken by boys.² And the gap is at its most pronounced when it is combined with social class.

Here, the focus is specifically on the performance of white working class boys. Problems persist throughout their education and emerge in the key stage tests. Ofsted reported in 2009³

White British boys eligible for free school meals perform particularly poorly. In 2008, 61% achieved Level 2 or above in reading and 53% in writing at Key Stage 1; 57% achieved Level 4 or above at Key Stage 2.

To put this in some context, in the same year, the average achievement for all students at Key Stage 1 (level 2) was 70% in reading and 61% in writing at Key Stage 1 and 81% at Key Stage 2 (level 4+). By the time these boys take their GCSEs, a huge gap has often opened with their peers. DfE data last December, based on 2010 exam results, showed that only 23% of white boys on free school meals get five good GCSEs compared with 55% of all pupils.⁴

For white British boys eligible for FSM, 22.8 per cent achieved 5 or more A*-C grades at GCSE or equivalent including English and mathematics GCSEs, compared with the overall national level of 54.8 per cent – an attainment gap of 32.0 percentage points. This gap is similar to that observed in 2007/08 and 2008/09, but wider than the two years prior to that.

There are even bigger gaps with the average achievements of girls and of students from Chinese, Indian or South East Asian backgrounds. Even when a lower target is used – five GCSEs at any grade – 15% of white boys fail to reach this standard, compared with 7% of all pupils.⁵ This all has a significant effect on what happens in later life. Ministers often quote the statistics on how few

² Joint Council for Qualifications (2011) *GCSE, Applied GCSE and Entry Level Certificate Results*,

³ Ofsted (2009) *English at the Crossroads: An evaluation of English in primary and secondary schools, 2005/08*

⁴ DfE (2010) *GCSE and Equivalent Attainment by Pupil Characteristics in England, 2009/10*

⁵ www.poverty.org.uk/26/index.shtml

working class boys get to Oxford and Cambridge. But it is no less worrying how few go into any form of higher education. The former Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills - now the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills – reported in 2008 that only 6% of white young men eligible for free school meals go on to higher education by the age of 19 compared with 34% of white young women not eligible for free school meals and 51% of such young women from black and minority ethnic communities.⁶

There have, then, been numerous statistical analyses of the problem. Concerns last summer about the riots in English cities have exacerbated a sense that more needs to be done to re-engage disaffected young men. Anecdotally, it is interesting that some inner-city academy principals report that their students were unlikely to have been caught up in the riots and looting, highlighting the impact that good education can have in disadvantaged areas.

⁶ DIUS (2008) *The gender participation gap in English Higher Education*

Summary of findings

Before looking at the findings themselves it is important to report that not all schools systematically tracked this group of boys. In fact some heads were pleased to agree to our presence in the school to interview until they discovered that all such boys had quietly slipped away.

recommendation 1: systematic tracking

Systematic tracking of this particular group of boys, from entry to post-school destination

What follows is a summary of coherent categories or themes that emerged during the conversations with the boys themselves. Each section contains quotes - many such quotes exist and would have been included here if space allowed.

theme 1: the right friends matter: colleague vs. mate

"I have a vast amount of friends, some outside school. I have friends inside of school that I won't meet outside of school. I don't know how it works, it's weird but I have kind of classroom friends but nothing more. And then I have those friends who go to different schools and I meet all of them outside of school"

"My school friends are more like....like I work with. My friends around my area, I just hang about with"

"A lot of my friends have dropped out because they can't be bothered to work. So I just don't really talk to them. I'd rather not talk to people who want to be an idiot. I'd rather talk to more successful people"

All interviewees talked about the importance of friends in their educational journey, but they had all been fairly ruthless about their friendships in one of two ways: one set had given up those friends who did not want to work, aware of their potentially negative influence on their lives. Their remaining friends, who may be long-standing, all shared their work-ethic and ambition. The others had created two distinct groups of friends: those with whom they had a laugh and their schoolmates who shared their ambitions and work-ethic. The first group comprised often long-standing mates with whom they had grown up, but who did not share their ambitions. They met them only after homework was done, or at weekends and during the holidays. Both groups of interviewees emphasised implicitly the importance of friends as work 'colleagues' in the school environment.

Often, interviewees had not realised how they had filtered or refined their friendships over time until they talked to us.

We were struck too with the resonance with the scholarship boys that Richard Hoggart described over 50 years ago in *The Uses of Literacy*. He describes himself as, “someone who had at once been freed and cut adrift by [his] education” and then goes on to describe a group of people-‘the uprooted and anxious’-who feel that they belong to no class or group... “He is likely to be separated from the boys’ groups outside the home, is no longer a full member of the gang which clusters round the lamp-posts in the evening; there is homework to be done.”

**recommendation 2:
make explicit the concept
of the colleague**

Schools should consider making the concept of ‘work colleague’, and the necessary choices that this implies, explicit to boys and their parents at key times in the boys’ education, redefining their relationship with less ambitious friends in the short term may be crucial if they are to succeed in their goals.

**recommendation 3:
be wary of the
consequences of
colleague vs. mate**

On the surface, most of the boys we spoke to had managed to make sense of the social sacrifices necessary if they were to be successful. Schools need to be alert to these and to the divided loyalties and feelings of rootlessness that they can lead to. That these feelings are normal should be emphasised and coping strategies discussed. Without this, the easier option of conforming might well be taken.

**theme 2:
the hook: success breeds
success**

“When I first got into performing – a year ago – my confidence wasn’t that good. It never was really, but now it is getting better. I was challenged to go up on stage for the first time and perform in front of the whole school. As I was walking down to that stage, I was thinking to myself ‘am I going to be able to do this?’, but as soon as I set foot up there and heard the laughter – I was doing a comedy sketch – I was thinking: It’s a new thing for you; it’s facing new things. Keep going”

“It was in year six at junior school [that I began bell-ringing]. As part of one of the projects we were doing, we had a visit to the local church and the person who was taking us around took us up into the bell tower and demonstrated, and said if anyone’s interested, come back on Tuesday evening. Me and my friend were interested in it and went back and it’s carried on since... at the time it was obviously something very interesting.... But the more I got into it...there’s a very kind of communal feel to it....a lot of the skills that are needed for ringing are very closely related to what you would need to be a doctor ‘cause you need to be a good team player, you need to have good concentration...good time-keeping, things like that. Dedication to it. The more I think about it, the skills do tie up quite well... I think it gave me the opportunity to build confidence ‘cause I was dealing with lots of different people from different backgrounds. It widens your understanding of things... It got me into a pattern of committing to something. Every Sunday morning... and if I didn’t the bells wouldn’t be rung”

The theme that most united the interviewees was that of early success. It didn't matter so much where they tasted success, rather that they had experienced it. Their first taste of success could have been extra-curricular or within a narrowly academic setting; it could have been inside school or outside; it could have been a highly personal achievement or something that happened with a group or team. The important thing was that it bred further success. Many of the interviewees highlighted the transferable skills that they had gained from achievements in club or society settings, including enhanced communication skills, team work, empathy, commitment, goal focus and, above all, confidence.

Their confidence in their own ability grew - confidence to attribute their own success to personal and internal factors and confidence to attribute moments of underachievement to external factors often out of their control. So when one of the boys failed to get a high enough grade at A-level to gain a place to read medicine, he came back to school as opposed to ending his studies. He is now in his third year of a degree in medicine. It was this group's early success, then, that seemed to have taught them that determination and hard work has its rewards.

**recommendation 4:
get to know the out-of-
school successes of
students**

Schools should know every boy well enough to find out if and when they had successful achievements outside their school and celebrate them, allowing them to present themselves as achievers rather than failures.

**recommendation 5:
Provide opportunity for
extra curricular success**

A varied programme of enrichment and extra-curricular activities should be provided and the participation of the boys encouraged and tracked, enabling them to succeed in their own, and others', eyes.

**theme 3:
celebrate genuine
success**

"I remember the first time I went [to the awards evening]. There were a couple of friends who came [here] from another sixth form, and they went to the first presentation evening for good A level results and they were blown away by it. And they thought that their [old] school would never do anything like this. All the teachers are in suits, and they get local people to hand out the sports awards and things like that. It is all great. I remember them being blown away, I've been here since I was seven and just thought it was what you did. It was always a bit cool, but just what happened. That was the moment I thought, this should be really held higher than what it is, cause it is cool"

As in theme two, all the boys interviewed saw praise as validation of work done correctly and as an encouragement for further effort. They needed to know that they were on the right track and to jus-

**recommendation 6:
celebrate curricular and
extra curricular success**

**theme 4:
the ethos of the school
and its teachers**

tify choosing the educational path they were on, and to signal to friends and family that they were in the right place. They enjoyed short informal celebratory conversations as well as the more formal assemblies and awards evenings where they shared their success with others- adding to the culture of learning of course.

Schools should understand that informal and formal celebration are necessary validation for these boys, whatever their age, and put the necessary systems in place to provide internal and external justification for their new educational journey.

"I think it would be very easy to lose that desire to learn [if I were in a different school] because I think if the majority of people around you don't want to, it can at times be very hard to go against the crowd and sit there and think, 'actually, I want to learn, I want to listen to this'. That's quite difficult"

Many of the young men alluded to the importance of a school establishing a culture of learning even if they didn't talk in those terms. It was important, particularly for those students who kept home and school separate, to feel that it was acceptable, indeed expected, that school should be a place of work, ambition and a 'can-do' attitude. They wanted their efforts to be seen as normal, not exceptional.

The combination of a general culture of learning, so their studious habits were not seen as strange by other students, and an expectation that it was natural for everyone to have high aspirations, was important to the boys. For instance, one academy student talked about working for one A-level subject at a nearby public school, where the understanding was that everyone would go to university, which helped to confirm his resolve.

A linked point here was that the boys appreciated schools which provided places to work and facilities outside school hours, especially if space at home was at a premium or if they had decided that it was best to keep home and school separate. They did not want special treatment, but felt that these opportunities should be open to, and welcomed, by the whole school community.

"All the teachers were really helpful actually, they never said to you, 'oh, you're an idiot, you can't do that'"

"[They told me] I could achieve so much more! Like in Geography I got a D I think, but the geography teacher said I could easily get a B if I put my mind to it"

"In year ten the teachers are saying you have to focus. I think it was our head, he got an assembly together with all year 11s and said you have to work harder, because you know you've been slacking. You've got extra sessions going on on these dates, please attend. And then the school would

follow you up on it. For example, I didn't attend the first few sessions, they had another assembly and those who didn't attend had to stay behind and say why. And since I had no reason, I was at the next one. Since then I've continued to focus"

"[What makes this school unique] is the dedication that a lot of teachers have towards all of us - Particularly in the 6th form as well. I mean that in every school, there will be one teacher that you feel cares about you as a person"

Teachers and associate staff are, of course, responsible for a large part of the school environment and this was not lost on the interviewees. The student / teacher relationship was often described as one among equals, or one that was more of a friendship than a traditional teacher / pupil relationship, particularly in the sixth form. When this was analysed further, however, it became clear that the fundamental tenets of this relationship were mutual trust and respect; being available and approachable; caring about students even beyond their academic achievement; and treating students like adult learners and with dignity.

Friendship appears to have been used as shorthand for these attributes. The concept of 'colleague' is more useful here too, with simple acts like staff and students joining the same queue for dinner and dining together, demonstrating the relationship. Teachers were also fundamental in ensuring that these boys were not limited by concerns about a cap on aspirations. They have been told that they can reach their goals with the right motivation, effort and support. Their teachers had high aspirations for them all.

**recommendation 7:
a culture of learning**

Schools should make explicit that a culture of learning is the norm and have zero tolerance towards deviation from this

**recommendation 8:
high aspirations**

There should be a normalization of high aspirations for all, with no excuses acceptable for a lack of ambition

**recommendation 9:
warm relationships**

Student/teacher relationships should be warm, professional and determined, mirroring those of close work colleagues as far as possible

**recommendation 10:
out of hours work space**

A space and facilities should be available for work outside school hours, attractive and publicised to all

“- Do you think you’ve had good careers advice?”

Oh, it’s been great. In [the predecessor school], I felt like I didn’t know what I was doing. I didn’t have a clue

- Because you were younger?

No, I think it was the school, but here they’ve had careers advisers coming in, they’ve had workshops in the hall, they’ve had CV set ups, they’ve had everything here. They’ve really helped a lot.”

In addition to caring for the students’ day-to-day educational needs, many of our interviewees stressed how important it was to have a school that offered them building blocks toward their future. Interviewees suggested that knowing why they were doing something (particularly homework or revision, which could be frowned upon by peers, and in some cases parents and carers) equipped them with a greater drive to ‘get it done’. For this reason, it was important to all of our interviewees that the school was able to give them in-depth advice, not just about further or higher education, but to help them set five and ten year goals with a series of manageable steps mapped out towards achieving them. Furthermore, it could not be assumed that the interviewees would have formed their goals through out-of-school explorations; instead, many relied upon their school to discuss potential goals with them prior to mapping out their path to achieving them.

It was clear too that the boys preferred the advice to come from someone who knew them well:

“My mates were obviously there for me. The teachers were all nice to me, always help me out and ask me if I was ok. My mum never really asked me how my day was or anything, she was just strict, and made sure I done well at school really. She didn’t really ask me any emotional questions or show interest

- If you wanted to could you talk to people in school about things?

Yes my tutor was really helpful in this school. Mr. W was really helpful with careers and getting me into college, and helping me out with what I want to do”

“When I was in primary school my big ambitions were to be a song-writer and a performer. When I got here my goals changed. I want to achieve something academic because I was shown that I was really good at that. [I want to be a history teacher]”

Schools need to provide detailed careers information and guidance from an early age, taking nothing for granted. This should be provided by a known and trusted adult, where possible, and followed up with clear practical support.

“...presumably your parents gave you every encouragement, and love, but they weren’t able to help you with the details of things?”

I wouldn’t say every encouragement. My dad said I’ll never be a doctor!

Did he?

He said I haven’t got the dedication to do it. He said I have by far got the brains but the dedication; I’ll never get that...”

The interviewees’ family backgrounds were discussed in depth. There were almost as many narratives underpinning their family lives as there were interviewees and an in-depth analysis of each is beyond the scope of this report.

It became clear through exploring careers and aspirations for the future, however, that what was required from the interviewees’ schools was to complement that which was offered at home. This was different for each interviewee. Some came from very supportive, loving backgrounds and needed little more than a detailed pathway to help them to achieve their goals; Others lacked the equipment required to explore their musicality at home, for example, but were able to do so at school; others had very little emotional support at home and the school was required to fulfill even the most basic of familial functions in order to allow the student to blossom.

“I’ve always kept my life kind of away from my parents, like they’ve always supported everything I’ve done...”

You say you kept your life away from your parents. Are you happy with that?

Yeah. I’d like to be really close to my parents but it’s hard, because my mum is always tired and she can’t do many things and we can’t plan ahead to do things as a family and we ... don’t know if she can wake up and be happy, and my dad is always helping her. So you can’t really get time to talk to them as well”

Secondly, and unexpectedly, there was a strong feeling from many of the interviewees that they did not wish to have their parents involved in their schooling to any greater degree than the occasional parents’ evening or, in some cases, as an audience member in a school production. Different students had different reasons. For some, it seemed like a simple function of adolescence, but for others a need, rather than a wish, to keep home and school separate due to the wide gulf between the values of home and the values of school and, often, in their own roles in each setting. Others were concerned that their parents had enough on their plates already without being involved elsewhere.

This notwithstanding, students did want parents to be positive about the school, often to avoid potential conflict, and this could be achieved through developing an ethos of trust and communication between school and home.

**recommendation 12:
complement that offered
at home**

Schools need to complement what is offered at home rather than replicate it. All students in this group have varying needs ranging from professional support for their learning only, to this, plus the kind of intensive nurturing that a functional family would provide. This implies close knowledge of each student's circumstances of course

**recommendation 13:
let students guide
parental involvement**

Develop an ethos of clear communication and mutual respect between home and school so as to keep the home 'on side' but respect students' wishes concerning further involvement.

emerging themes worthy of attention but requiring further investigation

Several areas of interest began to emerge from the study that will require further research to corroborate. The most important of these are:

carers

A significant number of our interviewees described themselves as carers when not at school, sometimes for siblings while a parent or parents were at work but, more often, for a parent who needed their support to manage a physical, mental or emotional disability. Few of these students spoke of a formal support structure that was available to them and, while some spoke of the difficulties associated with their role, many simply relayed, matter-of-factly their day-to-day routine, showing maturity far beyond their years - but at what cost? Further research would be needed before suggesting a causal relationship between the interviewee's success and their role as carer, but it doesn't seem far-fetched to posit that transferable skills would be developed through this role, just as they are through other extra-curricular activities.

geography

A pattern concerning the geographical location of those being interviewed began to emerge. It is currently best couched as a rural and coastal / urban divide and, without a much greater sample, the picture of the differences between the two is complex. Repeated themes did emerge often enough to ensure that rich data would be collected from any further study, however. The differences made themselves most apparent when the interviewees' aspirations for the future were discussed and, particularly, where they saw themselves fulfilling those ambitions. Those from urban areas were very likely to place themselves out of their current environment when picturing the future - often some distance away. Those who didn't see themselves moving to other areas, on the whole, were unlikely to know where they wanted to settle. Those from more rural/coastal areas, and this was particularly true in the South-West and the East of England, were considerably more likely to show a strong desire to stay in the locality that they were interviewed in. Similarly, while those who had expressed a desire to aim for a particular career from the urban centres were willing to travel to fulfil their ambition, those from the more rural/coastal areas were not. As a

consequence, the latter's ambitions were shaped to a much greater degree by the opportunities that existed in the region of their school.

The same also seemed to be true of university choice, with a much greater variety of desired destinations present in the students from urban centres, while those from rural/coastal areas, on the whole, opting to study at their local institution where possible. The effects here were strong enough to suggest that further research is required into students' aspirations across England and that any policy implemented to raise the achievement of this demographic should be regionally sensitive.

**confidence with, and joy
in, language**

Over half of our interviewees showed a skill with language that often surprised us both. They clearly took pride in the way that they spoke and in particular words that they used to convey their, often complex, ideas. In addition to this confident verbal expression, was a confidence about the future and their own continued success. These interviewees had their goals most clearly defined, a clear pathway mapped out, and were confident in their ability to achieve their goals almost to the point of arrogance, as one interviewee put it. These students were not arrogant, however, they had learned that, more often than not, their hard work and effort were rewarded with success and another open door. We are most confident about the future success of these articulate interviewees who constantly remind themselves that 'I can...'. It would be interesting to follow the progress of some of these students as they embark upon their journey to A-Levels and beyond. We feel already that we can include this factor in our recommendations

**importance of sport and
arts**

Some of the boys paid tribute to their experiences in sports and the arts, alluding, implicitly at least, to the pleasure, success, confidence, successful team-work and cultural and social capital they had afforded them. One or two were clear that 'acting out' helped them in strange situations. This could be examined further as an adjunct to our views on the importance of 'the hook'. How explicit have the schools been in developing the cultural and social capital of their students? How successful have their interventions been?

other areas

We were surprised to find out that although the boys we talked to found reading easy, they could not be described as voracious readers, that they did not seem to have role models, and said very little about styles of learning that suited them best, though they did mention their preference for experienced teachers who treated them as equals before the task. These areas, along with a wish to track these boys as they continue their educational journeys, would also prove fruitful and useful areas of further study

summary of actions useful to schools

This is a general summary and a list of points agreed by our focus group of interviewees developed at a meeting to discuss and clarify our findings after initial analysis had taken place. They agreed the wording below.

- Introduce systematic tracking of students to ensure their potential is not missed.
- Make it clear that fellow students are 'work colleagues' - separate from mates outside school – ensuring the street stops at the school gate. Encourage and aid informal and formal support networks within this cohort.
- Celebrate achievement formally and informally. Provide opportunities for boys to experience the lift in confidence and “winners mentality” given by success in activities both in school and out-of-school from as early on as possible in their school career. Encourage an ethos of high aspirations for everyone in the school.
- Make it explicit that a culture of learning is the norm in the school.
- Encourage student / teacher relationships that are warm, professional and determined.
- Provide, and encourage the use of, a comfortable and well equipped place to work outside school hours. Where necessary ICT equipment could be made available to loan to students who cannot stay after school.
- Trusted teachers should provide detailed and personalised information, advice and guidance (IAG) to each student, from an early age, with step-by-step support to help them achieve their goals.
- Encouraging personal development that leads to the acquisition of life skills as necessary and fosters independence.
- Personalise student support so that it complements, not replicates, that which is offered at home.
- Ensuring that parents trust the information that they receive from the school and trust that the school is on the side of the students. Parents must not feel excluded or threatened even if the students do not want them to be actively involved in their education.
- Develop boys' skills in spoken and written English building their confidence and fostering an articulate 'can-do' attitude and belief.

activity following on from the research

- The work was student-led from the beginning and continues to be so. The focus group of boys is active, driven by their shock at the statistics on the lack of achievement of boys like them.
- A film where four of the interviewees discuss their educational experiences has been made.
- A presentation was made at The School Network's National Conference in November where the results of the first phase of the research were discussed and two student ambassadors talked about their educational experiences. As a result, 50 schools signed up for further involvement and we are able to work with the first seven of these from February 2012.
- A regional launch event is planned at The City University on February 28th.
- Plans have been made for collections of case-studies suitable for primary and secondary levels.
- The need for an online presence has been recognised following discussion with the focus group.
- Plans for online student mentoring including personalised IAG are being discussed.
- The need for an alumni scheme for schools where students are supported in the next stage of their education following school, in return for mentoring of the next cohort, has been recognised.
- Partnerships are being pursued to enable the above.
- Funding is being sought to continue the research.

Lesley King and Tom Welch, February 2012