Supporting Educational Attainment, Progression and Aspiration of young white disadvantaged males: an action research project

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Background

Only 10% of the most disadvantaged white British Males progress to Higher Education (HE), significantly less than disadvantaged males from other ethnic backgrounds (Hillman and Robinson 2016). As a result of this, these authors argue that funding arising from a shift from financial support to outreach programmes should be directed to initiatives aimed at engaging young men, particularly disadvantaged young men, with regards to HE (Hillman and Robinson 2016). This gender gap for disadvantaged white males has received national focus and attention however; there has been a shortage of ideas for tackling it.

Whilst the issues impacting upon disadvantaged white males entering HE is multi-faceted. Broecke and Hamed's (2008) analysis suggests that there is no additional gender effect at the point of entry to Higher Education, for example admission and enrolment conversion rates, therefore argues that efforts to reduce the gender gap in HE participation have to be focussed upon increasing the relative attainment of young men prior to HE. What is evident from reviewing the literature is that the attainment gap between boys and girls is steadily growing throughout compulsory education and this ultimately impacts upon GSCE attainment rates. In 2013/14, 58.9% of girls achieved at least five A*-C GCSEs or equivalent, including English and Mathematics, compared to 49.0 % of boys and this impacts upon their ability to access and undertake 'A' level studies, which typically are a pre-curser to HE. Exploring this, with regards to both 'white working class" boys and girls this gap continues to be prevalent (Baars et al 2016).

One of the challenges identified in the literature is the definition of 'white working class'; there are many differing ways of identifying and measuring this. For the purpose of this research study, the definition of white working class was taken from the report 'The underrepresentation of white working class boys in Higher education' published by Kings College (Baars et al. 2016) which includes individuals from White British declaration, that have one of the following characteristics 1) parents are in skilled and semi-routine occupations 2) parents dependent upon the welfare state for their income 3) pupils eligible for free school meals (FSM) or pupil premium (PP). Research by the Department of Business Innovation and Skills (2015) identified those young women in receipt of free school meals still more likely to gain entry to HE in comparison to their male counterparts (19.8% for girls and 13.1% for boys). Within the Poole Local Education Authority, the numbers of young pupils entitled to FSM, identified as Pupil premium, at 15 who subsequently went to HE by age 19, was 12% in comparison to those non–FSM which was 40%, a gap of 28 which is significantly higher than the national gap of 17 (Department of Business Innovation Skills 2015).

The aim of this action research project is to establish principles of successful approaches which can be adopted to address lower educational attainment and aspirations of white 'working class' boys.

Methodology

This research study consists of two parts:

1) Part 1 Literature Review: Undertaking a systematic search of the published literature, between 2007 and 2017, in order to identify principals of best practice that have been identified to address the educational deficit between 'white working class' boys and other disadvantaged groups.

2) Part 2 Qualitative Research: To undertake focus group interviews in order to understand the experiences faced by white 'working class' boys, their families and staff working with them.

This report will just focus upon the findings from Part 2 of the study: qualitative research.

Qualitative Research

Focus groups are defined by Krueger and Casey (2009 p.2) as a "…a carefully planned series of discussions designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, nonthreatening environment." As the purpose of the research was to elicit an understanding into insights of 'white working class' boys learning, it was identified as the most appropriate means of data collection as all participants shared the same experience. Year groups 6-10, ages 10-14, were identified as the chosen cohort, as this is a pivotal time which included the transition from junior to secondary school as well as crucial years in the boys' secondary school education. It was decided to exclude year 11 boys from the study as it is in this year that the pupils sit their GCSE examinations; as such it was felt that including them could be detrimental to their learning and attainment.

The schools were identified key gatekeepers in the research as they had established relationships with the young boys, their families and staff working with them. As such the schools identified the pupils who were eligible to participate in the student; middle ability 'white working class' boys. Focus groups were undertaken within the school day and within the school setting. A member of the school staff support team was present within the boys' focus groups, in order to provide a familiar face for the boys. However, they were reminded that the contents of the focus group were to be kept confidential and not to be discussed with other members of the staff team. At each of the focus groups with the boys, pens and paper tablecloths were provided, to enable them to write down their names and any answers, for example bedtimes, if they wanted and these were collected after each

focus group. Within all of the focus groups the same focus group prompts were used, to ensure consistency of data collection (Table 1). In addition, there was an opportunity for participants to add any other comments and thoughts at the end of the focus group discussion. Supportive nods and comments such as 'yes' and 'please continue' were provided to encourage participation; it was evident from the responses gained that those that participated in the focus group discussions felt comfortable to express their thoughts and comments.

Table 1 Focus Group Prompts

WWCB and their Parents	Teachers
• Experiences of school • Lessons enjoyed most/least • Experiences of Parents evening • Homework routines • Bedtime routines • Career plans after school • Their thoughts why girls outperform boys at GCSE	• Their experiences of working with WWCB and their learning • Aspirations of WWCB • Their perceptions re WWCB learning • Homework • Their thoughts why girls outperform boys at GCSE

Ethical Issues

As the study involved working with young people the guidelines for research involving Children and Young People (National Children's Bureau (2011) and the Social Research Ethical Guidelines (2003) were taken on board. To ensure the safety of participants, the focus group interviews were undertaken at a designated room within the school setting and were co-facilitated by a BU researcher (Dr Heaslip or Karen Cooper) both of whom have an enhanced DBS. The parents of the young boys identified to participate were provided with a Participant Information Form (PIF) and a Participant Agreement Form (PAF) and the parents consented on behalf of their children prior to any interviews being undertaken. The young boys were then provided with verbal information about the study, checking their understanding and gaining their assent to participate before data collection begins. Both parents and teachers that participated in the data collection were also provided with a Participant Information Form (PIF) and a Participant Agreement Form (PAF), and asked to consent to

participating in the study. Both the PIF and PAF stressed the voluntary involvement and the confidential nature of the study although there would be access to anonymised responses. The focus group discussions were audio recorded, transcribed verbatim and analysed using Braun and Clarke (2006) process of thematic analysis (Table 2).

Table 2 Phases of Thematic Analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006)

Phase	Description of the Process
Familiarizing yourself with your data	Transcribing data, reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial thoughts
Generating initial codes	Identifying initial codes across the entire data set
Searching for themes	Collating codes into initial themes
Reviewing themes	Checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts in the data set, generating a thematic 'map'
Defining and naming themes:	Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, the overall story the analysis tells

During the data analysis, the focus group data of Poole High was read independently by VH and the St Edwards data by KC where the first two phases of the thematic review were undertaken as key words/phrases were highlighted and initial codes and categories were identified. Both VH and KC independently analysed the data from Oakdale Middle school and then discussed the identified categories to reduce researcher bias. VH and KC then met to share codes/categories and undertake phases 3 and 4, searching for themes and reviewing themes. Further review of extracted themes was completed concluding with final review by the project steering group to ensure credibility of the identified themes.

Participants

In total thirteen focus group interviews were undertaken across the three schools that participated in the research (Poole High, St Edwards and Oakdale Junior School) (Table 3)

Participants	Focus Groups	Participant Numbers
Parents	X1 Poole High	2
	X1 St Edwards	13
Staff	X1 Poole High	9
	X1 St Edwards	7
Year 6 Boys	X1 Oakdale Junior School	13
Year 7 Boys	X1 Poole High	2
	X1 St Edwards	9
Year 8 Boys	X1 Poole High	17
	X1 St Edwards	5
Year 9 Boys	X1 Poole High	12
	X1 St Edwards	10
Year 10 Boys	X1 Poole High	10
	X1 St Edwards	7

Findings

During the analysis, the following themes were extracted:

1) Impact of family experience
    a. Single parent family
    b. Bedtime routines
2) Societal Gender Expectations
3) Education
    a. Homework
    b. Curriculum
    c. Teachers
    d. Rewards and Sanctions
    e. Communication
4) Careers

1. Impact of family experience

The first theme related to the wider family experiences which could have an impact on the boys learning. Within this are two subthemes single parent families and bedtime routines.

1.1 Single parent family

This subtheme was raised by the staff participants who identified that the wider family experiences impacted upon the boys' aspiration, progression and attainment. They highlighted anecdotal correlations between single parent families and lower attainment, in which the boys have limited access to a positive role male figure in their lives. Not only is access to positive male figures limited but these boys are also more likely to live in lower income households and be identified as Pupil Premium:

> 'And what's is very telling and has been for years and years is the higher the ability range the more likely they are to be in a home where parents are together. The lower the ability range, on the whole, the more likely they are to have an absent father who they sometimes don't see at all or sometimes have minimal contact with' (Staff)

> 'if you looked through my data book…the lower ability sets, the amount of children who are down as Pupil Premium in that is much bigger, in my 16 in my bottom set, I think 11, 12 of them are Pupil Premium in one way shape or form, which versus about four in the hashtag (Higher ability set)' (Staff)

> '…a Year 9 boy said, just completely off the cuff, sir do you live with your son? And he went oh. Well, he's lucky then, isn't he? …a son who actually lives with the dad. And I thought that's quite interesting. He vocalised that. There must be a lot of kids in that position' (Staff)

1.2 Bedtime routines

Bedtime was very variable, between 8-2am; not only between year groups but also within year groups. It was apparent that some parents struggled to maintain bedtime routines whereas others had clearly established these. The major challenge to this was electronic media; gaming and phones. Those parents who had established bedtime routines had clear rules regarding the removal of such items at bedtime, and those parents who struggled with a bedtime routine spoke of difficulties 'policing' bedtime. This was also noted by the boys many of whom were open and honest regarding their hidden use of technology without their parents' knowledge, in which they acknowledge resulted in much later sleep time:

> 'Mobiles, tablet, anything, you know, everything stays in the living room. Nothing goes into his bedroom at all. So there is no temptation' (Parent)

> 'It's pretty hard to police, I find' (Parent)

> 'We have to go up and check, he will say I haven't got it and then we'll go like, well, where is it? It's not down there. So, we'll go up and have a look and he has took it and sneaked it up..' (Parent)

'Yeah, I... I actually...I actually wait...wait until my mum, like, tried to fall asleep, my mum's boyfriend, and then I start playing on the Xbox and watching TV' (Year 7 boy)

'I go to bed at half ten and stay on my phone till one o'clock in the morning' (Year 9 boy)

'I have to put it (Phone) in the drawer, but I don't actually. I put it under my pillow and get double blankets and put it over me and they just won't see it and I play games on it' (Year 9 boy)

2. Societal Gender Expectations

There was a general accepted consensus across all of the stakeholder groups, Parents, Staff and Boys, that boys simply do not perform as well as girls; girls were more mature, organised, and conscientious who read more and took more pride in their work. Conversely, boys were less mature, more disorganised, much more apathetic with regards to their studies, read less and tended to be more physically orientated. What is interesting from the boys' perspective is that there was a general feeling that girls were more naturally academic than boys. They did not perceive that girls performed better than the boys were due to the strategies they implemented to facilitate learning, rather than a latent enhanced intellect:

'If you look at some of this…if you look at a girls' homework, they take pride in it. You look at a girl, you know, they take pride in their appearance. You know, most blokes at that age it's like get it done, go and kick a football about. You know, I mean, my son's writing is absolutely atrocious. And I have to say mine isn't much better, but, you know, I mean, I look at my sister's writing compared to mine, it's completely different' (Parent)

*'…I think boys tend to want to rush their work through more, whereas I think girls will spend a little bit more time and be more conscientious in getting it done…I have noticed with **** he will do it, like he will have a sheet to do and he'll finish in it and I'll say, is that all you've done on it? Oh yeah, that's the one that needs doing and I'll say, well, are you sure you don't need to write a bit more or include some pictures or do some extra…? No, I don't need to' (Parent)*

'You've just kind of got to accept that boys will be boys' (Staff)

'Because they (Girls) try hard, they do their homework; they do every single one of their lessons' (Year 9 boy)

'I think, like generally…girls are generally more academic than boys' (Year 10 boy)

Within the classroom setting the issue of distraction arose. Parents identified that distraction in class was linked to their class peers; as well as the boys being the cause of distraction. From a parents' perspective, this occurred due to boredom in lessons which lead to distracting behaviour:

'… that was my son's problem. He'd finish…he's quite a bright lad and he'd finish early and the same thing. Be chattering away, distract everyone' (Parent)

'Boys are just generally, like, full energy and messing. They muck around to be honest' (Year 9 boy)

'And when we are in class because we do get distracted and sometimes distract, like we sit away from each other and then we try and talk to each other' (Year 10 boy)

3. Education

One of the main themes that arose was education. Within this, there were a variety of sub themes including homework, curriculum, teachers, rewards/sanctions and communication.

3.1 Homework

The parents identified that homework tended to follow a feast/famine approach of extended periods with little or no homework followed by a plethora of homework set in a short space of time. In addition to this, there was a perception that homework was set but then not collected or marked and for the boys this had a negative impact on their motivation to complete homework tasks, which was already low. This non-submission of homework was also identified as an area of conflict for the staff, regarding the impact this had on the boys' education and confidence. Pedagogical advanced such as 'flipped' classroom require pre-reading as a pre-requisite for learning, yet this was identified as a risky strategy when homework is not always completed. In addition, staff felt uncomfortable chasing homework due to concerns on damaging motivation for learning:

'…so, for two weeks, no homework whatsoever…and then all of a sudden in one presentation, you need to do the poster, you need to do this. And I'm thinking calm down' (Parent)

'Yeah, they get set some homework over the summer holidays…and they get quite a lot of homework set…but the teachers never ask for it. So my son said right next time I'm not doing it. And that's fair enough…' (Parent)

'If you've got a teacher that constantly loads you with homework and then doesn't check, you think what's the point of doing it. You're not going to bother looking at the homework, I'm not going to bother doing it' (Year 10 boy)

'If they tell you to do say a sheet like a poster or a leaflet about whatever…chemistry or something…then you spend three hours on a poster and then the teacher doesn't even look at it, you just think I just wasted hours of my life' (Year 10 boy)

'Homework is a risk because, you know, we've all had this idea of flip learning…you learn outside the classroom, you consolidate inside the classroom. That is a

phenomenal approach if they do their bit outside….I just don't take a risk. The homework I set does not derail or reflect the next lesson we have' (Staff)

'…I'm not gonna chase it (Homework). What's the point of that? What's the point of making them feel even more disadvantaged? 'Cause they probably don't even got a quiet room on their own to do the work at home (Staff)

It was evident that the notion of completing homework was not perceived by the boys to be 'cool', this resulted in boys not wanting to initiate submission of homework when not asked by the teacher or resorting to asking teachers for pretend sanctions, for example 'detentions', so they could complete homework:

'Sometimes they get set homework and they don't even ask for it. I'll often say to him did you get that piece back that you did? And he'll say mum, I went to the lesson and they didn't ask for it. And I'll say well, didn't you say Ms. I've done my homework. And he was like mum, you know…. And I'm like yeah, okay …you could always slip it to her…' (Parent)

'I'd, um, a GCSE student this year, Year 11 lad who asked me if I could give him a detention so he could be…not be seen to just be coming back to do homework' (Staff)

There appears to be a difference of opinion between parents and staff where homework should be completed. From the parents' perspective, they perceived a lack of homework support within school and did not articulate their role in the management of homework. Whereas two staff members expressed that they perceived homework should be completed within the home environment. One staff member raised an interesting perspective that the homework set maybe beyond the ability of the parents to support which could lead to potential embarrassment. Both parents and staff identified that registration/break times were often when homework is completed resulting in a rushed completion and standard of work:

'One of my year nine boys would openly admit he would have spent like break time rushing through his homework and not actually doing it at home… and he'd be quite proud of the fact that 45 minutes' worth of homework can be done in a paragraph and at the speed of light' (Staff)

'I think they go home and, um, parents have reached their academic limit where they can assist. So actually, it becomes an embarrassing moment' (Staff)

It was apparent from the data that distraction was an issue for their boys undertaking homework at home. From the parents' perspective, this distraction was linked to technology; social media and gaming. This was also noted by the boys, many of which identified they undertook their homework in their bedrooms, unsupervised by their parents. The boys also identified that home circumstances

(family) also distracted them whilst they were completing homework at home. It was apparent that both schools provided an outside homework support club, however it was noted by staff that the majority of individuals that use this facility were girls and in one school a lack of computer facilities was identified by the boys as an issue inhibiting engagement:

> *'Well, I just think he'll see the Xbox and then he'll go, can we go on that or actually can we have the TV on or… and I'll say no, no TV because just try and get it done and then you can go on your Xbox after and just general things like that really' (Parent)*

> *'When I'm doing my work, I've forgotten my phone is in my pocket, and someone texts me and it goes up…it buzzes. So, I take it out and look at it and start texting them back' (Year 6 Boy)*

> *'… had an exam yesterday and Sunday night I was on X-Box with my headset on talking to everyone while I was looking through my book, but I wasn't really looking…I wasn't really reading it, you know like, it's just it's easy to get distracted' (Year 10 boy)*

> *'I've got a lot of things that can distract me. For example, I don't usually do it at my dad's but if I do, then, there's lots that distract me because there's five dogs and they always need walking and attention, because one of them's quite ill. And then, I've got the parrot annoying me because it just keeps squawking and saying stuff. And then, the hawk just screams and the cat's just fight; not actually fight just play fight. So, there's a lot of distraction' (Year 6 Boy)*

> *'Too many distractions at home, like if you're doing it in school you can just get more into instead of something next to you which will get you distracted' (Year 10 boy)*

> *'There are like quite a lot of computers but some of them don't work' (Year 8 boy)*

> *'…school opens the library early in the morning and after school for them to do homework. But whenever I've walked past, it seems a predominantly very young, (Year 7 & 8) female environment' (Staff)*

3.2 Curriculum

Curriculum changes at a national level such as the national drive towards increasing the numbers of young people taking Ebaac subjects (Modern Foreign language and a Humanities subject) have also had an impact and this was identified by both the staff and the boys. Many of the boys identified feeling frustrated that they had to take a GCSE in a subject that they were not particularly interested in and this reduced their motivation to study. The boys felt frustrated that this policy in effect reduced their GCSE capability and yet they had no choice in whether they were allowed to undertake this or not. This also made it more challenging for staff as they had to try and motive the boys to study in these subjects.

'If you're an Ebaac student you have to pick a humanities and you had to pick a language which I really did not want to do and I wish I hadn't done it now because now I can see myself failing Spanish. So that's a GCSE I've lost out on and I could have done something else…so I got forced to do subjects that I knew I wasn't going to do well in' (Year 10 boy)

Like, in my subject I have a lot-especially Year 9 boys-who I'm only doing History 'cause I couldn't do Geography and they said I wasn't allowed to do Computer Science, so I'm here and there's so much writing. I don't like it. And they've got, often, very low target grades. Their English writing's not fantastic and they're seating in…in an exam asking them about interpretations of McCarthyism and they go I wish I was in woodwork' (Staff)

On a day to day basis the boys expressed a desire for and interest in subjects that facilitated a practical pedagogical approach and for which they could see the relevance to their lives. In contrast, their greatest dislike was passive delivery of education in which they were expected to copy from the board and subjects in which they could not see the relevance of why they needed this in their futures. In particular, worksheets were identified and highlighted as the greatest area of dislike by the boys; many of which felt that this passive delivery of education did little to enhance their enjoyment and therefore learning of a subject. They also expressed that this passive delivery of education did little to facilitate a relationship between them and the teachers, which it shall be noted later in this report is key to engaging with these young boys. The year 10 boys noted that many of the revision sessions included worksheets which they struggled to be motivated by. The boys identified that if worksheets have to be used then they need to be built into the lesson as an active interaction between themselves and the teachers rather than, what they perceived was a substitute for teaching:

'We need to upgrade the education and how we teach our generation, like, we need to update it, like, make it more …we need to make more productive and more enjoyable for kids because when the teacher is just telling you to copy off the board …' (Year 9 boy)

'Practical things, like practical science…That's good' (Year 9 boy)

'But French languages, I don't see why we should do it because we live in England' (Year 7 boy)

'They say, hello this is our worksheet, fill out these questions, show me when you're done. They have no communication with the students, you feel like you and the teacher don't know each other' (Year 9 boy)

'The teacher needs to get involved in the worksheet, like, read it out to you, tell you exactly what you've got to do. Like English, like yesterday we had a supply teacher. Didn't have a clue what we were doing, just gave us a worksheet and said you've got

to do this. None of us knew what we had to do. We just had to read the worksheet and just do it. They just download it off the internet and just give it to you and say this is what you've got to do for this lesson' (Year 9 boy)

'It's not fun. Like the…it doesn't interest me, revision. It's just boring. If they made it fun and like actually like a way of revising that wasn't just sit there… (Year 10 boy)

'Make revision fun as well. Instead of just going there's a sheet, do actually like have something to let us…more enjoyable. Like in my Science, that teacher just every week she hands out a sheet like its blooming sweets (Year 10 boy)

Double lessons were also identified as problematic by the boys, unless it was PE, and the boys felt that these needed to be broken up with a break between the end of lesson one and the start of lesson two. The boys felt that listening to music when they were working would be beneficial as it would stop people talking. On the whole PE was extremely well thought of by the boys, many of which noted it to be their favourite lessons, often citing the practical nature of the subject which they found engaging. There was a request however for the schools to offer more masculine sports, such as boxing:

'Double lessons are quite hard' (Year 8 boy)

'Well it depends what subject because if it's like when I've done Geography and they don't… you just go straight out the whole thing, there's no gaps like… If you've got a double PE you're having a party really (year 10 boy)

'I think it would help if we were able to listen to music in class. Because some people do, but it's the point like if we're listening to music, we're less likely to be talking. Not when the teacher is explaining, but when we're getting on with work, if we've got it on, then that's a distraction from the class, distraction from not misbehaving and from sort of talking to your mates because if you've got your music in' (Year 10 boy)

'The school doesn't like boxing and like more masculine sports. Like it would be cool if we could do like boxing in PE like we could just go into the gym and like punch some bags and do some pad work. That would be really good' (Year 9 boy)

3.3 Teachers

It was evident from all of the participants, boys, parents and teachers, that teachers were perceived to have a fundamental role to the boys learning, they impacted on the boys' enjoyment and subsequent success in particular subjects. Whilst some of the parents and the boys were complimentary regarding the teachers and their ability to support the boys' education, knowing their child was really perceived as important by parents but they also identified that some teachers had a negative impact on the boys' enjoyment at school.

'…the teacher that you know has taken the time to think about who your son is and how they perform and looks at him as a whole. Like I had one teacher…a chemistry teacher…who immediately wanted to look at his progress report and she wanted to look at the whole picture in terms of his ATL scores. And then she sort of said to him this is why…he's dyslexic…so she was saying this is why this score is low is because it's, you know this subject depends a lot on writing. And she just saw the whole picture. Another teacher literally I could tell she was just almost just reeling stuff off. And I felt as though she probably was going to say a very similar thing to every single parent that sat down in front of her. So, I think, again, teachers need to look at the whole picture of a child' (Parent)

'I think teachers need to also understand the student, like, they need to understand different types of students and have different ways of teaching then just one way' (Year 10 boy)

'He wanted to change teacher and everything, it was awful for him…Because he loves subject ****, he said I just don't like the teacher. She's got it in for me, she hates me' (Parent)

'I suppose what I like about teacher like him that he's not afraid to like have a laugh with like the kids as well. Like because if you've got a boring teacher like I just find it boring' (Year 10 boy)

'But when you go to that lesson, you know you're gonna at least laugh once and be like…and he plays music, like when you're doing your work, but it makes you want to get on with your work more because you know that he'll like reward you for it, if you get what I mean?' (Year 10 boy)

This is not to say the parents did not want teachers who were strict, rather they wanted teachers who were firm in their expectations in class but who balanced this with an understanding of their particular child's needs. From the boys' perspective when asked about who where their favourite teachers and why, many of them firstly identified male teachers and when further explored why, it appeared that they have developed more of a rapport with the male teachers, they felt they could 'joke' with them and this facilitated the development of a positive relationship. Female teachers that were identified as good teachers also focussed on this use of humour and mutual respect in the development of a healthy relationship, they could acknowledge mistakes they made and this made the boys respect them. This relational aspect was also identified a key by the staff working with the boys, some of which shared their life experienced to build bridges and when this was done it was perceived positively by the boys.

'The teacher is key, really, I think. And yeah, the idea of a teacher who is strict, but is effective' (Parent)

'Respect as well. Some of the teachers the boys have like…fly off the handle at them. And that winds my lad up big time' (Parent)

'I do find he responds quite well to male teachers, I don't know why… I don't know if they've got a certain way…' (Parent)

'I find that to have a good relationship with them makes a huge difference in how they are inside your classroom. That, for me, I can find, can be the tipping point between whether I'm going to get anything or nothing, particularly boy students' (Staff)

'…is relational. If you can win them over…If you can build a decent working relationship with them as a person, then that's just human nature. I think that the success that I've had with this sort of demographic has come from the fact that we laugh, we joke, we get on, in an appropriate way, which actually means they come in looking forward to seeing me…of course, I play the 'working class' card whenever I can because it's something that they can relate to' (Staff)

*'Miss **** because she's funny. But she can be strict if she wanted. And if you're not doing your work, she'll tell you. But she's also nice and she makes work fun, but I don't know what it is but she'll make it hard, make it hard but in a fun way for you to do it'* (Year 6 Boy)

*'One time in History with Miss **** we did this trench thing we put around the tables in History. She was just like, what happens when one team go over the trenches on their stomach because if they go in front of them then someone gets shot'* (Year 8 boy)

*'He is, like, one of the funniest teachers in our school and Mr **** he has a very, very good way of teaching and he what you are capable of and he pushes you to that high standard you should be at'* (Year 7 boy)

'Like it's just really nice when like you know that he kind of trusts you and you can trust him' (Year 8 boy)

'Because like she…she can like, she's funny and whenever she gets someone's name wrong she just gives it…she gives everyone in the class credit' (Year 8 boy)

'It's awkward with a girl teacher' (Year 9 boy)

Teachers that were identified as less popular by the boys tended to be those which had inconsistent behaviour management strategies or humiliated them in front of their peers. One aspect the boys did not like was to be reminded of their previous behaviour, in past years, they felt it was as if this was not fair. That is not to say that the boys did not like strict teacher, they did, however state that this needed to be balanced with a sense of fairness:

> *'I don't like Miss **** because anyone who does anything wrong, she would like stop the whole class and tell you off' (Year 6 Boy)*

> *'She gives out warnings for no reason and one thing about most teachers is if they don't see who's calling out, they'll turn around and just guess who it was and give them a warning; (Year 8 boy)*

> *'But Mr **** if they see me in the middle of something, they'll always accuse me of doing it, so, like, if I'm just stood, trying to break up a fight, they will accuse me of actually fighting or if I look like or speak to someone in Assembly, he'll say you didn't have a good year last year. And he always brings that up' (Year 7 boy)*

> *'She's just like really moody all the time, like if you walk into the class and just talk once, she'll be like, oh give me your planner, that's a detention, and then she's mostly the reason why like I'm getting detentions all the time, because she'd give me a bad day and stuff like that, and yeah, she is unfair' (Year 8 boy)*

> *'It's like, it's better because if they're strict. Other people who are like really silly, they won't mess about, that's why. That's better' (Year 9 boy)*

It was clearly evident that the boys' perception was that teachers like girls more and preferred teaching them. This translated into a perceived lack of parity of treatment between boys and girls and the boys expressed that they felt they are treated more harshly in comparison to girls within school. The implications of this in light of the importance of the relationship and perceived fairness, which is seen as fundamental to the boys learning, which was presented earlier, needs further exploration:

> *'Teachers like girls more' (Year 8 boy)*

> *'Teachers prefer girls, I think' (Year 9 boy)*

> *It's quite biased…they all help girls, but boys… (Year 10 boy)*

> *'If a girl goes up to a teacher and asks to move, they will be allowed to move and if they ask to go to the toilet they'd be allowed to go to the toilet. Where if we ask the same thing, they just won't let us' (Year 9 boy)*

'I think some teachers, not all, but some teachers are a bit more hot on boys than they are girls…if a girl does something wrong they're more willing to overlook it than if a boy does something wrong' (Year 10 boy)

'…if a boy and a girl have their hand up at the same time, the teacher's more likely to go for the girl' (Year 9 boy)

3.4 Rewards and sanctions

It was evident that both schools provide a system of rewarding positive behaviour, for example E praise and merits system, as well as sanctions for poor behaviour such as detentions and report cards. Whilst the parents liked the rewards systems offered, they acknowledged that it provided little incentive for the boys, instead they preferred when staff gave them sweets to reward them. This was also recognised by the staff who identified that this system of rewards was more effective with female pupils. From the boys' perspective the incentive systems used, appeared to do little to incentivise them. In addition, the boys in the lower years perceived that girls are rewarded more often than the boys and this does little encourage belief in the system.

'Because my son's 15 and I can honestly say he wouldn't care less about E Praise' (Parent)

' I think the rewards and…and all that is…is a very female thing' (Staff)

'No. It's very rarely (rewards) for a boy. Very rarely' (Year 7 boy)

'They're useless because all they do is get you like a certificate and sometimes a pen (Year 7 Boy)

'Oh I just don't understand sometimes like when they give, they reward girls more than they do boys' (Year 8 boy)

'Credits, I think they're just pointless. They don't do anything. Don't care if you get them…Like, it doesn't mean anything' (Year 10 boy)

'Every now and then get a sweet from a teacher' (Year 10)

With regards to the sanctions, it was highlighted by the boys that they received many more sanctions than girls, with boys making up the predominate numbers in detentions. The boys also felt that detentions offered little deterrent and only served to be boring. Some boys felt an alternative sanction was required such as 'litter picking', or to use the detentions time to actively learn. For more serious behaviour breaches, pupils are placed on a report card, from a parental perspective when this sanction is implemented they were not consistently implemented, which devalued the

process. For the boys, it was noted that being on report was perceived by their peers as a positive experience as the popular boys are often those on report:

> *'There's like 20 boys and they'll be like two girls in detention (Year 9 boy)*

> *'When you sit in detention, there's like four girls and about 20 boys' (Year 10 boy)*

> *'The after-school detention it may be boring, but it's not getting them to stop it...like stop behaving that way. So if they went round, like, picking up litter on the field or something' (Year 9 boy).*

> *'And a bit like it's pointless just wasting the teachers and all the pupils time, like, surely they can make you do something in the detention, learn something' (Year 10 boy)*

> *'How I see it is if I miss homework it's a 15 minute DT, that's all it is. I can deal with that' (Year 8 boy)*

> *'It seems like the people who are really, really popular have them (Report cards)' (Year 8 boy).*

> *'Well they do put them on report, but then that's willy-nilly if they fill it in or not, the teachers' (Parent)*

3.5 Communication

Effective communication with the school was identified as a 'mixed bag' for parents; on one hand, they perceived that individual teachers were good at responding to communication they had initiated. However they also perceived a lack of pro-active communication regarding boys and their behaviour, feeling that the schools tended to wait for a crisis or significant issue to occur before communicating with them. This is in contrast with the teachers who feel it is them that usually initiate communication rather than parents:

> *'....individual teachers are often very good at getting back to you. I mean, I've emailed once or twice individual teachers and they are very quick to get back, but it's always with your prompt. I'm not sure a teacher would think about emailing you...' (Parent)*

> *'Normally when there's a problem, that's when we hear about it. And it's too late then because the problems, you know, embedded. So we need to know if they're getting to that level...' (Parent)*

> *'I do feel that sometimes, the parents aren't that keen to necessarily contact us. I feel that they're not contacting me as a math teacher to say, "You know, so and so doesn't get much math homework from you, why is this, or could you make sure you give them a bit more, they like a bit more because they want to be pushed, they*

*want to get a higher grade or whatever. I don't feel that the parents come and talk
to me. It always seems to be me contacting the parents, when I do contact them,
they're great. You know, they always reply and they're always very supportive'
(Staff).*

Parents evenings were valued as an opportunity to engage with parents, however as the sessions are booked by the boys there is potential problems firstly in remembering to inform their parents and secondly for the boys to be highly selective in who their parents see. The boys admitted, and the parents recognised, that the boys can manipulate the system by only booking in teachers who they felt would give them a positive report. From a staff perspective, not all parents attend parents evening which is difficult and those that do tend to be focussed on the boy's behaviour rather than their academic achievement and progress in the parent evening consultations:

> *'I forgot to tell my mom about it…But wish I would have went (Year 9 boy)*
>
> *It's like teachers that like say bad things, the teacher that I know that say bad things
> I just don't get an appointment (Year 8 boy).*
>
> *'I just don't choose the teachers…because you can choose what teachers you do. So,
> I just say to my mum oh yeah, I couldn't get this person, I couldn't get that person,
> but I'll get all the teachers that like me because then I'll get a good parents evening
> (Year 10 boy)*
>
> *'But the boys do that because they only book appointments with good teachers, the
> lessons they're good in' (Parent)*
>
> *'…they say thank you very much for telling us when parents' evening is but they don't
> seem to come' (Staff)*
>
> *'I think the focus of the parents tends to be more on behaviour than brains. Such as is
> he messing around? Is he being the class clown? Are people laughing along with
> him? Is he causing you a problem? Not necessarily what can they do to get better'
> (Staff)*

4. Careers

The focus of the boys for their future carers tended to include careers that did not require a university qualification including; public sector (armed forces, police, pastoral worker, fireman), sports orientation (professional footballers, rugby coach, professional boxer, personal trainer), construction (plumber, builder) or media focussed (U-tuber, game designer, famous). A large majority of the boys were interested in a professional sporting career but did not necessarily play sports at a regional or national level; as such their expectations were often unrealistic. This was

noted by the Staff participants who identified that the boys tended to have more unrealistic expectations regarding their careers in comparison to girls. Of the small number of boy participants that did consider careers which required a HE qualification, this focussed upon sciences (engineering), and teaching (PE). Staff expressed that discussions regarding HE for these boys were more difficult due to lower family aspiration and a lack of cultural capital. Yet some staff challenged the notion that aspirations should always focus on HE in light of the financial implications of this choice and this was also noted by one of the boy participants:

> 'They're quite unrealistic about...the boys more than the girls, about future careers'
> (Staff)

> 'I mean, there's...there's lads who are in Year 9 who don't even play for a club outside of school but still believe they are going to be scouted and go on for Man-United'
> (Staff)

> 'if there are not many aspirations from home, we're fighting a locked door, really'
> (Staff)

> 'I think there's, um, a lack of understanding of, um, what it takes to get into university from parents' (Staff)

> 'I want to go against the assumption that actually university is what we should all be aiming for. That is something that particularly in the financial climate we're in, that a lot of them, they don't want to do that and it's a really sensible choice not to do that. Because they don't want to land themselves with 40 grand worth of debt and I think it's really important that we open up the possibilities of apprenticeships in all sorts of things' (Staff)

> 'I don't know. Something fun, I guess. I mean, I don't want to be stuck in like a really bad job where you just kind of like do random things' (Year 10 boy)

> 'I definitely don't want to go to University. If you pay like some people are still paying off the money they borrowed from University when they're like 40 years old. I think, like, just for a degree...and so many people that are getting degrees, it doesn't really, like, to the employer it doesn't really mean a lot because everyone has them so that's why I think It's unnecessary to go there' (Year 10 boy)

Thoughts and considerations moving forward:

The qualitative research has identified many issues that require further consideration. Before we continue to discuss these, it is important to note that education is a tripartite responsibility between individual boys, their families and the schools and as such recommendations made are targeted towards all three areas.

It is evident that the school environment provides some of these young boys' access to positive male role models and for some boys these may be the only positive male role models they have in their lives and the importance of this has to be acknowledged. The perceptions of 'boys will be boys' needs challenging as this provides cultural expectations and assumptions for poorer levels of attainment. Whilst there appear to be differences between the genders with regards to learning styles these differences need to be embedded within educational provision. However, it is also important that family members challenge both theirs and their boys' perceptions that girls are more academic than boys and work with their boys to develop strategies to manage areas of difficulty, such as poor organisational skills.

It is also evident that the bedroom routines of the boys need addressing, many of the boys openly admitted to going to sleep much later than their parents were aware of and this was directly related to access to social media, mobile phones and games consoles. NHS Choices (2015) recommend that children between the ages of 9 and 13 should have approximately 9 hours and 9 hours 45 minutes, of sleep. Sleep deprivation has been consistently linked to poor attention, fatigue, poor academic achievement and negative impact on children's mental health and well-being (Beebe 2011; Lehto and Uusitalo-Malmivaara 2014)). Zhang et al (2017) have raised the global concerns of sleep deprivation being linked to heavy media use, highlighting that improvements to sleep patterns requires collective efforts from schools and parents. Cain and Gradisar (2010) suggested that improving sleep duration and quality electronic devices and phones should be kept out of bedrooms. Recent BBC News headlines (2017) have included 'school gives pupils alarm clocks to replace distracting phones' and 'Just a few nights bad sleep upsets your brain', highlighting the current interest in this area.

Homework is an area that needs addressing; firstly the school needs to balance out homework levels to more consistent patterns to avoid the 'feast or famine' experienced. The issue of homework not being marked also needs addressing and the schools have to question if homework is not marked then it has to be questioned what is the objective of setting it. Setting homework but then not marking it is devaluing it for the boys as well as providing mixed messaged regarding expectations. Whilst the out of school provision for homework is predominately used by girls, it should be continued and perhaps communicated to parents and the boys, as a strategy for those pupils who may struggle to complete homework at home. The number of computers available needs to be explored.

One of the largest areas of frustration for the boys is the perceived passivity of pedagogical approaches used in education, especially the use of worksheets in class and revision sessions which is not valued by the boys. The boys clearly value educators who are able to develop humour but firm positive relationships with them that is built upon mutual trust and respect. Female teachers need to recognise they have to invest more into this than their male counterparts. Some of the individual sanctions used need to be challenged, such as public telling off and bringing up examples of poor behaviours from previous years. There were some excellent examples of active teaching, such as the history lesson and a key finding from this research is that staff critically examine their lessons to identify ways in which to increase activity and reduce passivity in lessons. Perhaps a school 'show and tell' at an inset day is a great way to share best practice. It is recognised that staff are under tremendous workloads and in this, the critical aspect of relationship setting with the boys could be lost, which is something which needs to be promoted and celebrated.

At a curriculum planning level, there needs to be a discussion regarding the Ebaac and the importance of actively promoting this, although the authors recognise that this may be out of the control of the school to decide. Double lessons require careful thinking through, avoiding when possible and when it they have to occur ensuring a break in the middle.

One of the areas for the schools to critically reflect upon, is the issue of unconscious bias and the degree to which boys and girls are treated differently at the school. It was clearly apparent that the boys perceived they received less rewards and more sanctions and we recommend that the school look closely at their data to examine the split between the genders in relation to this. This also needs to be raised, in light of the self-fulfilling prophecy, in that if the only attention received is negative, then it is still attention. The schools need to identify a rewards system that actively engages with the boys and then enables opportunities for the boys to actively achieve this. An example was where one of the schools offer a trip to Thorpe Park, yet few of the boys we spoke to, appeared not be either rewarded or enabled to go to this. If rewards are perceived to be an impossible goal then it reduces any motivation for trying.

Lastly, the management of parents evening needs to be managed more effectively to improve the quality assurance. The boys admitted to manipulating the system so simply relying on the boys to book in to see certain teachers is a potential risk strategy.

Recommendations

1) The schools look to develop guidance to parents regarding the use of technology and the need to establish health sleep routines

2) The schools actively challenge perceptions of 'boys will be boys' with staff, boys and parents in order to address the lower expectations with to progression ad attainment

3) The issue of homework needs to be explored within the school. If homework it set then there needs a corresponding expectation that it will be submitted and marked. Otherwise it sets a negative perception regarding homework and mixed messages regarding behaviour expectations. The schools should continue to provide a space for undertaking homework in school premises outside of school hours for those boys which do not have a suitable space for homework at home.

4) Schools critically examine use of passive pedagogical approaches used within lessons (especially use of handouts) which do not engage boys in learning.

5) Nationally the focus on Ebaac has to be considered especially as it reduces choice for undertaking subjects which are more motivating for the boys

6) Schools critically examine use of behaviour management strategies both positive rewards which typically are more attractive to female students as well as examining the degree of unconscious bias with regards to sanctions, as both boys and their parents perceive that teachers are less tolerant of boys in school.

7) Schools address self-selection at parents evening by the boys.

As part of the initial aims of the project, Phase 4 is for educational initiatives to be implemented to promote attainment and aspiration of middle ability white 'working class' boys, utilising evidence from the data.

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