

White Working Class Underachievement in Southwark

There persists a demonstrable level of underachievement by white working class pupils. Indeed, a recent Parliamentary Education Sub-Committee delivered the verdict that they were “*consistently the lowest performing group in the nation*”. Various reports have addressed and highlighted the incidence of white working class underachievement, in particular from the Runnymede Trust¹, Denis Mongon’s research paper for Ofsted and his report on Successful leadership for promoting the achievement of white working class pupils² and Feyisa Demie’s research report for Lambeth Council³ (this latter report is especially applicable to Southwark because of the demographic data ‘shared’ by these neighbouring boroughs.) Similar research findings and outcomes were addressed by Edna Mathieson⁴.

Educational underachievement in this respect is defined as low attainment that is below age related expectations in a particular curriculum subject or skill. A research review commissioned by the DfE has also revealed that,

The attainment of White British pupils is polarised by social class to a greater extent than any other ethnic group. White British pupils from managerial and professional homes are one of the highest attaining groups, while White British pupils from working class homes are the lowest attaining groups.

Professor Mongon has encapsulated the fundamental problem confronting the issue:

The educational attainment of sixteen year old White British Students from families with low incomes is on average below that of comparable groups in the English education system and has been so for as long as there has been reliable data

A vital point of qualification is essential with respect to terminology. Mongon’s (frequent) use in his sustained analysis of ‘working class’ inevitably incorporates conceptual slippage: in the extract cited here ‘working class’ is equated with ‘low income’ Subsequently in his research he invokes another criterion to reference ‘working class’ - those in receipt of ‘free school meals’. Demie has noted this dilemma and issued caution to identifying without sufficient precision the study group.

Dr Demie’s research in Lambeth deployed standard (and proven) research methodologies and data interpretation, which is ideal for an ethnographic study in Southwark. His research focused upon case studies,

based upon 16 Lambeth schools which explored the view of pupils, teachers, parents, headteachers, governors, confirmed the under-achievement of the group and identified what they saw to be reasons: teachers’ low expectations, parental low aspiration of their child’s education, economic deprivation, stereotyping, feelings of marginalisation, low literacy levels, curriculum barriers, and lack of targeted support to break the cycle of poverty and disadvantage.

He deployed structured questionnaires for headteachers, teachers, parents and pupils to identify evidence of barriers to learning. In tandem with this, focus groups were formed to discover whether any mirrored response was evident. The barriers identified included, passivity in the classroom, poor school attendance, reluctance to attend after school and homework clubs, lack of stimulation and general lack of knowledge at home, a small world mentality (some children rarely leave their home or estate boundaries), a naïve slant of celebrity culture and a demand for instant gratification (echoes of imagining the so-called dream factory of Hollywood combined with the plethora of reality television programmes). Several parents genuinely believed that the schools were failing their children because it was the duty of schools to educate their children. Importantly, working class parents tend to generalise from their own experiences of not engaging with their schooling. A comment by one teacher cited by Demie is illuminating:

The problem is that whereas their Black Caribbean peers start with high achievement and some underachieve, White Working Class students start low and end up lower.

Here we are up against problems of non-attendance. This group often keeps below

the radar and politically remains below the radar

In this respect it is instructive to heed Basil Bernstein's (Karl Mannheim Professor of Education, University of London), dictum concerning cultural transmission:

Education cannot compensate for society.

Mongon recognised the importance of a holistic approach to addressing the problem of working class underachievement:

it's not single factors which make a difference, but as many contributors to the success of children from low income families as possible.....child, family, school, neighbourhood, community....having people around them that believe in them, encourage them, challenge them, support them.

The excellent research report produced by Demie and Lewis provides an invaluable blueprint which Southwark could utilise as a point of departure. Thus, too, their informed recommendations for providing a context for such research:

- strong and inspirational leadership by the headteacher;
- sustained high levels of expectation for all pupils, parents and teachers;
- the promotion of an inclusive curriculum, which raises aspirations and, importantly, meets the needs of white working class pupils (and their parents);
- development and maintenance of close links with parents and increasing community support, which earns the schools the trust and respect of parents;
- effective use of data and rigorous monitoring systems which track individual pupil performance;
- good and well targeted support for white working class pupils through extensive use of teaching assistants and learning mentors;
- critically, sustained and continuous effective support for language development amongst white working class pupils;
- co-ordinated support for the transition between primary and secondary sectors;
- celebration of cultural diversity, including working class culture, and a strong commitment to equal opportunities.

Several of these points are already enshrined in Southwark's policies and practices.

Only the Local Education Authority and the corresponding services of Southwark can together seriously address the problem - it cannot be addressed 'at arm's length' by national government. However, use of the Pupil Premium to close the attainment gap for white working class pupils could be a valuable funding option.

This briefing paper suggests, with respect, that Southwark Council consider replicating Lambeth's work in Southwark schools. As already stated to the Chair of the Scrutiny Committee, Councillor Jasmine Ali, we are prepared to undertake this research at no remuneration to the Council.

References

1. Runnymede Trust: Who Cares About the White Working Class
<http://www.runnymedetrust.org/uploads/publications/pdfs/WhoCaresAboutTheWhiteWorkingClass-2009.pdf>
2. Denis Mongon: Educational attainment - White British students from low income background. Research paper for Ofsted's 'Access and achievement in education 2013 review'

Denis Mongon: Successful leadership for promoting the achievement of white working class pupils
<http://www.teachers.org.uk/files/successful-leadership-summary.pdf>
3. Feyisa Demie: Raising the Achievement of White Working Class Pupils (Lambeth Council)
http://www.lambeth.gov.uk/rsu/sites/lambeth.gov.uk.rsu/files/Raising_the_Achievement_of_White_Working_Class_Pupils_-_Barriers_and_School_Strategies_2014.pdf
4. Edna Mathieson: Research in Education: An Interdisciplinary Research Journal, No. 54
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Appendix 1

Edna Mathieson: Resumé

Edna was born, bred and continues to live in Bermondsey, Southwark. The schools she attended were the Boutcher and St. Saviour's and St. Olave's Grammar School for Girls. Her working life has been divided almost equally between teaching - at all levels - and research, at the University of London's Institute of Education and the London School of Economics respectively. Edna also worked as a researcher for the ILEA, subsequently becoming a Member. Within the borough of Southwark she has been associated with several community campaigns and initiatives, in particular, the Bermondsey Forum, the Bermondsey and Rotherhithe Society and the North Southwark Development Group. Edna was actively involved with the Coin Street Community Housing Project.

Edna's two degrees are in sociology and sociology of education. She also has a PGCE and an Ac.Dip. in Education. Edna is an FRSA and an ex Queen's Awards in Education Reader, and was awarded the Freedom of Bermondsey. Edna set up the Southwark Community Education Council (SCEC) - a supplementary education charity which still continues to provide additional support to local children and, importantly, their parents. The work of the SCEC is recognised by the LSE where an "outpost" called "Widening Horizons" has been established.

Peter Chester: Resumé

Peter is a working class Londoner who grew up in Peabody Buildings. He originally left school at the age of 15 to pursue an engineering apprenticeship in Southwark. He entered university in his mid-twenties as a mature student, obtaining a degree in Philosophy and Anthropology, a PGCE and a DipEd. Because Peter had nurtured a *passion for learning* he continued studying part-time and was awarded an MA in Education, an MSc and an MPhil in History and Philosophy of Science. He was a teacher for 33 years - in adult and community education, sixth form and further education and enjoyed working for the Open University as an Associate Lecturer for 19 years (part-time).

With and alongside Edna Mathieson, Peter was a founder member of Southwark CEC and worked for Morley College, establishing its pioneering programme of community education for North

Lambeth and North Southwark. He subsequently founded and chaired Tower Hamlets Advanced Technology Training (THATT) which targeted unemployed women and minority ethnic people residing in the borough. This attracted European funding for several years.