

White working-class boys and their many barriers to learning

Philip Dore looks at the educational underachievement of white working-class boys and the possible reasons why some students feel alienated from the process of learning, focusing on some of the barriers to learning that affect their achievement.

Educational failure?

According to recent UCAS Reports (2016 and 2021) there is a worrying imbalance in the number of male students applying to university. In 2016 young women were 36 per cent more likely to apply to university than young men. When this is broadened to those from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds the difference is stark; young women were 58 per cent more likely to apply than young men. In UCAS's 2021 Report the broad numbers of white males applying to university is the only ethnic group that has shown a decline, a decline of nearly 16 per cent in applications since 2011. This all adds up to show that white working-class males are the least likely to apply to university.

Such discourse about examination outcomes suggests that aspiration is synonymous with a particular pathway, which does not take into account employment vocational pathways or students' interests. Schools, colleges and universities are held responsible for not equalising educational disadvantage. This often leads to such institutions undertaking initiatives like outreach work with students in under-represented communities or belonging to particular profiles.

Boys' educational underachievement at GCSE is alarming. Whilst there is a well-publicised 'forgotten third' who do not pass their GCSE English and Maths, only 56 per cent of boys secured their English and Maths in the summer of 2019. The achievement gaps for disadvantaged students are even worse. In the summer of 2022, DfE figures show that 'disadvantaged pupils - mainly those eligible for free school meals - had GCSE results on average half a grade lower than children from better-off backgrounds, the widest gap since 2011-12. The

gap for children with special education needs was even wider, averaging three-quarters of a grade lower' (*The Guardian*, 20th October 2022). It seems that disadvantage is a fairly accurate predictor of low-achievement. The gaps in achievement at post-16 are less dramatic. However, boys are much less likely to do A-levels in the first place.

Besides GCSE Physics and Maths, boys achieve less than girls. When race and class are introduced into this comparison the figures speak of a large group of children who have been underperforming in all measurements for over thirty years, much longer by other comparators. The discourse of deficit, catch-up, disappointment and blame is perhaps very unhelpful. To what extent white working-class boys internalise these messages or how they are seen as being successful learners or not by educators can lead to some complex and contestable barriers / issues being simplified and vulgarised within the educational discourse.

Who are you calling working-class?

Arguably, 'working-class' is now a moniker to be disavowed and defined against rather than be defined with. Such change in communities and in how people identify themselves has sometimes been presented as a natural or organic response to social change. Arguably, three particular circumstances allowed far-reaching social and economic restructuring to be recast as natural and organic rather than as an act of symbolic violence or class warfare. Firstly, the population has changed over time inasmuch as the working class used to be predominantly white, whereas Britain is now a much

more multicultural society. Secondly, market forces have dictated that the working class in traditional industrialised communities have been left behind by changes to the labour market, especially by the decline in UK manufacturing. Finally, the neoliberal racialised discourse where the white working class have been labelled pejoratively, where particular factions have been problematised by labels such as 'chav', 'white trash' and 'scum'. In these terms the notion of working-class has become pejorative. It is ironically used as a remote definition that encompasses vulgarity and fecklessness.

In a 2014 Parliamentary Hearing, there was a shift in how underachieving white working-class students were conceptualised. The label 'disadvantaged white children with low aspiration' replaced 'working-class children'. Such a shift would seem to suggest that disadvantage is only as much a problem as an individual student allows it to be. The cementing of this particular phrase occurred in a hearing held on the 'underperformance of white working-class kids'. However, such students' results are still not yet measured separately in school performance data as a particular group, although white working-class boys are disproportionately represented within the pupil premium cohort.

Reay (2004) attests that a relentless focus on academic achievement has the potential to 'depreciate emotional capital while simultaneously augmenting cultural capital' (p.69). In other words, pursuing examination results as the measure of a student's success has emotional consequences and confers a prestige on knowledge that excludes students of low-academic ability and those who reject this form of education. The barriers for white working-class boys may even be wider than that and predicate around their undesirability for employers where 'their class, their accents, their performative masculinity are seen by employers as a challenge to the attributes required in a service economy' (McDowell, 2012, p.581). This suggests that even if white working-class boys were to subscribe to the discourse around 'aspiration' and meritocracy, then there are many other barriers to be faced.

Barriers to learning

Barriers that are often cited for white working-class boys, though not exclusively for them, include: low-level literacy skills, low aspirations, identity crises, laddishness and toxic masculinity (toxic masculinity has gained worrying traction recently with social media influencers proffering warped views of masculinity and a sense of entitlement). It is interesting that these 'barriers' can be attributable to individual or family failings; it is the fault of parents,

peer groups or the individual if they have disadvantaged themselves or choose not to engage with the educational opportunities on offer. However, such monikers are simplistic and often misunderstood.

In my research, which followed ten white working-class boys at risk of permanent exclusion over a three year period, there were many ways in which the boys' perceived educational failure could have been explained. It could, for example, be:

- conceptualised as a learned disinterest borne of not achieving or succeeding in the past;
- viewed as a deliberate disconnection from perceived opportunities within the changing labour market; where the employment opportunities on offer simply did not appear worth the effort;
- seen that a malaise in the attitudes of boys is because they want something for nothing;
- that the boys were displaying what agency they could in choosing to not 'play the game' of education;
- due to an act of symbolic violence on a vulnerable group, struggling to find its own semantic space of identity.

However educational failure is understood, it is important to remember that, whilst the underachievement of white working-class boys may be seen as a collective failure, it is often felt in a deeply personal way. Ostensibly, they are often seen as a homogeneous group who possess a collective midset. The participants in my research felt an increasing alienation from their education and from each other and saw their educational failure as a deeply personal experience. Whilst they were seen as collectively laddish and masculine by adults and some other students, they felt individually isolated, and such educational failure had consequences on their self-esteem, mindset and aspirations.

Masculinity and laddishness

McDowell (2012) argues that employment changes have made traditional forms of masculinity redundant. This must raise the question if crises of identity are being suffered by children who feel alienated by the education process and the perceived rewards it brings. There is a lack of student voice from much of the surrounding literature: white working-class boys are discussed in terms of their homogeneity and their educational failure. Broadly, marginalised white working-class boys in particular are denigrated for their immaturity and laddishness, therefore as a problem to be solved.

Nayak (2006) argues that such boys 'exhibit "spectacular masculinities" of white male excess . . . young men accrue a body capital that has a currency and a local exchange value within the circuits they inhabit' (p.813). This suggests that such accrued capital may create some prestige within less-legitimate contexts than school, but such prestige is confined to a limited social group, which in turn is debased and denigrated because of its 'excess'. Nayak argues that those 'positioned as already marginal to the dominant symbolic are presented as "useless" subjects rather than "subjects of value"' (p.474). Then, because of this, in extreme circumstances white working-class boys may seek to generate alternative ways of making value, such as by criminal activity. The discussion often feels judgemental rather than developmental.

Skeggs and Loveday also attest that the white working class's experience of injustice generates affective responses expressed as 'ugly-feelings', which marginalise them further as they articulate an experience that appears different, bitter or ungrateful. Croizet et al. (2017) argue that society's institutions impose symbolic violence on the white working class and other lower socio-economic status students. This occurs by students having to judge, early-on in their school career, whether 'they are smart, motivated, meritorious and deserving . . . or not' (p.105). They also argue that hidden advantages within the education system 'fuel the symbolic disqualification' of lower socio-economic students and that 'this symbolic violence undermines the self and amplifies social inequality' (p.106). Whether such symbolic violence is fuelled by the contestable spaces that white working-class boys inhabit or if those positionalities are an imposition in themselves is an important discussion. What was clear was that, in my research, barriers to learning were not as straightforward as exhibiting a particular behaviour. The barriers were spaces of struggle, contradictions, painful feelings and marginalisation.

In my research the boys did not view 'laddishness' as a barrier to learning, although many teachers and some other students did. The sociology of laddishness, its conceptual basis, existence and influences are complex, but many teachers I spoke to summed it up by such phrases as:

- 'they think it's funny'
- 'face-saving'
- 'immaturity'
- 'work avoidance because learning is seen as geeky'
- 'a lack of resilience if something is a bit tricky to do'
- 'rowdy behaviour'

- 'cheek'
- 'yobbish and loutish'
- 'a pre-occupation with the gutter'.

The idea of 'laddishness' is perhaps a lazy attempt to problematise boys' behaviour as a self-inflicted issue. It also labels a particular mindset as being incompatible with the field of education, at least within the meritocracy of doing well at school. What is also noteworthy is the language used to describe boys at the extremes of marginalisation. Such laddish behaviours were firmly viewed as the boys inflicting further marginalisation and disadvantage on themselves.

It would be fair to say that the boys who took part in my research contributed to their own marginalisation, at least to some extent - although the reasons for this are complex and somewhat paradoxical. Simmons et al. (2020) argue that white working-class males may choose this path in order to be 'somebody' in their own world rather than be a 'nobody' in the mainstream of school or college. There was clearly some kudos for these boys in being acknowledged as powerful within their own social circles. Perhaps this is not as contradictory as it first appears, as the boys learnt to navigate the various fields of their lives. Arguably, the participants in my study exercised some agency in rejecting mainstream education and employment, even though this may have been exacerbated by feeling that these fields had rejected them.

The participants in my study offered the following insights into how the individual struggles of white working-class students can be separated from viewing them as a collective:

- Reciprocity: the currency of doing something for something held weight for my participants, even if this form of exchange was small;
- Opportunities for student voice: asking students about behaviours, the pay-offs and attempting to understand the frustrations that some students feel about the education process;
- Not accepting laddishness: it was interesting to note that the boys reported that the majority of adults in schools were resigned to laddish behaviour and it had become acceptable;
- Praise: my participants were rarely praised / rewarded, or they were over-praised for trivial things to the point that it lacked currency with them;
- Mentoring: a range of adults who can communicate in different ways than the traditional exchanges of the classroom;
- Recognising laddishness as a protection strategy / fear of failure / attempt at agency; my participants were keenly aware that their laddish identity was an act of belonging rather than accept

the alienation of school;

- Challenging sexism, misogyny and extreme attitudes;
- Role-models: having positive forms of masculinity modelled and celebrated as part of a values culture which does not allow students to opt out.

Barriers to learning are complicated. Schools tend to put specific interventions in place that seek to simply raise educational achievement, but the feelings of my research participants were real, complex and in constant flux; their positionalities in school went beyond revision techniques or repetition of content. The boys in my research read the world of school that surrounded them, developed strategies of varying success, whilst navigating and mediating the possibilities they felt were open to them. However, they did so through constant compromise which perhaps enacted symbolic violence on their emerging sense of identity.

References

Croizet, C., Goudeau, S., Marot, M. and Millet, M. (2017) 'How do educational contexts contribute to the social class achievement gap? Documenting symbolic violence from a social psychological point of view' in *Current Opinion in Psychology*, Vol. 18. pp.105-110.

Department for Education Statistics (2022) *KS4 Performance*. 20th October 2022.

Education Committee Report (2014) *Underachievement in Education by White Working Class Children*. 18th June 2014.

McDowell, L. (2012) 'Post-crisis, post-Ford and post-gender? Youth identities in an era of austerity' in *Journal of Youth Studies*. Vol.15, No.5. pp.573-590.

Nayak, A. (2006) 'Displaced masculinities: chavs, youth and class in the post-industrial city' in *Sociology Journal*, Vol.40, Issue 5. pp.813-831.

Reay, D. (2004) 'Gendering Bourdieu's concepts of capitals? Emotional capital, women and social class' in *Theory Culture Society*. Vol.20, No.6.pp.57-74.

Simmons, R., Connelly, D. and Thompson, R. (2020) "'Education ain't for us": using Bourdieu to understand the lives of young white working-class men classified as not in education, employment or training' in *Research in Post-Compulsory Education*. Vol.25, No.2. pp.193-213.

Skeggs, B. and Loveday, V. (2012) 'Struggles for value: value practices, injustice, judgement, affect and the idea of class' in *British Journal of Sociology*. Vol.63, Issue 3. pp.472-490.

The Guardian, Adams R. and Weale S. 'GCSE grades gap for disadvantaged pupils in England widest in a decade'. Published on Thursday 20th October 2022.

UCAS Report (2016) 'Scheme-level data on admissions to full-time undergraduate higher education in the UK in 2015'. January 2016.

UCAS Report (2021) 'Scheme-level data on admissions to full-time undergraduate higher education in the UK in 2021'. January 2022.