**An Exploratory Study: Raising the attainment
of underachieving white working-class boys**

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**Abstract**
This paper focuses on and researches existing documentation relating to the underachievement of white working class boys. This issue is undoubtedly of national importance, as a Joseph Rowntree Foundation report recently found that "white British students make up more than three-quarters of low achievers in English schools and do worse than children from other ethnic groups with similar economic backgrounds" (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2015). The aim of this paper is therefore to identify and examine a number of methods and strategies which suggest how white working class underachievers may be better progressed in an inclusive context. Whilst "the possible causes and contributors to white working class underachievement are many and various", it is still "clear that schools can and do make a dramatic difference to the educational outcomes of poor children" (House of Commons Education Committee, 2014). As such, this paper and its subsequent research will critically review how schools can, and to what extent, promote progression for white working class boys who are underachieving.

**An Exploratory Study: Raising the attainment of underachieving white working-class boys**
Increasingly, it is the case that a number of "governments all over the world have been committed to the development of an inclusive education system" (Dyson et al: 2015). Whilst such is supported at government level and may well mould "the values of the next generation of children" (Heartland.edu: 2015), a number of disagreements have arisen between LEA officers, parents and teachers (Dyson et al: 2015) regarding whether such a system is realistically able to cater for students with significantly varying needs and demands. Remembering that "white working class underachievement in education is real and persistent" (House of Commons Education Committee: 2014), the question arises of whether an inclusive context can cater for the needs of these individuals by improving the lives and aspirations of the poorest children in society, as seen in initiatives like *Every Child Matters: Change for Children in Schools* (DfES, in Gazeley and Dunne: 2005).

As "working class pupils are less likely to achieve 5 A* - C passes at GCSE than their middle class peers and are less likely to go on to higher education" (ONS in Gazeley and Dunne: 2005), it is clearly important that these individuals are consistently supported. However, it remains a challenge of identifying such support mechanisms as "a lack of consensus over social class classifications has made research on education and social class difficult in the past" (Gazeley and Dunne: 2005). In further agreement, a recent inquiry into supporting white working class children stated that "from the oral and written evidence presented, it became apparent that this group was not well-defined" (Parliament.uk: 2015).

Furthermore, "a recent literature review conducted for the National College and the National Union of Teachers found that, while gender was an important and significant predictor of educational attainment, the social class attainment gap between young people from socially deprived

backgrounds and well-off backgrounds was three times wider than the gender gap" (NUT: 2009). Considering this, in conjunction with the lack of confirmed strategies to support white working class underachieving boys, perhaps partly owing to the absence of a formalised definition for the group, it is clear that it would be useful to assess and measure the effectiveness of using different strategies to support the attainment of white working class boys who are currently underachieving. Whilst "the possible causes and contributors to white working class underachievement are many and various" (House of Commons Education Committee: 2014), it is, according to the House of Commons Education Committee, clear that "schools can and do make a dramatic difference to the educational outcomes of poor children". However, for such to be accepted as valid, a formalised definition of white, working class and underachieving would have to be used and accepted. The focus of this paper is therefore to be centred on how such students can be defined and which support mechanisms and strategies can support attainment to offset current underachievement.

With the key focus of raising progression and countering underachievement, two white working class underachieving boys are to form the primary focus of this paper and my subsequent primary research. To ensure clarity, each of these elements will be separated and definitions of *'white'*, *'working class'* and *'underachieving'* will be considered. Each of the two students has been categorised as *'white'* which "is a broad heading within classifications of ethnicity which can be used to make comparisons against other aggregated groups such as black and Asian" (House of Commons Education Committee: 2014). Further, each individual has been determined as *'working class'* whereby assumptions about parental occupations and typical demographic characteristics have been used to determine socio-economic group. These assumptions were made using ACORN, which analyses "demographic data, social factors, population and consumer behaviour" (ACORN: 2015) to provide "precise information and an understanding of different types of people" (ACORN: 2015). By using the student's postcode, ACORN produces a report which details typical health, income and lifestyle factors. This report and the factors detailed are typical of the postcode region and other similar postcode areas; the data is not specific to the student or street.

It must, however, be remembered that there are alternative ways of classifying socio-economic groupings and, as such, a limitation exists in that the findings of this research are perhaps relative only to individuals who have been determined as working class using ACORN. Students who have been classified using methods such as the Pupil Premium measure and FSM eligibility may respond differently to the strategies proposed or the categorisations used, therefore rendering this research perhaps non-specific to the needs of these individuals. Of course, "how much money a child's parents earned last year (the qualifier for the lunch program) does not itself impede learning" (House of Commons Education Committee: 2014), whilst students classified as working-class by the ACORN scale may "be less likely to attend a popular and successful school" (Gazeley and Dunne: 2005); thereby possibly experiencing an impediment to individual levels of progress and attainment associated with the school and not themselves. To summarise these points, it can be deduced that working-class students may have different needs depending upon how they have been classified as working-class. A further limitation exists in that Gazeley and Dunne suggest working-class underachievers may be likely to attend a less-successful school; this of course being a potential determinant on the child's underachievement as opposed to anything on an individual level specific to the one student. Whilst there is much scope for assessing the attribution of underachievement to either a specific individual or an entire school, this falls outside of the scope of the paper, but must still be considered as a limitation of my primary research findings which will be explored.

Finally, *'underachievement'* has been defined as "relative to what a pupil could be predicted to achieve based on prior attainment" (House of Commons Education Committee: 2014). The main benefit of using such a definition is explicit: basing underachievement on the student's own prior attainment measure minimises the likelihood of inability contributing towards what appears to be

underachievement, as opposed to underachievement being based upon comparisons of similarly performing students whereby the actual student's prior attainment is not considered. For the purposes of classifying a student as an underachiever, Flight Path progress records were analysed and each student was performing at below target in at least two of their GCSE subjects.

Having clarified the definitions of each element, the paper can further focus on the literature available which suggests strategies for supporting white working class underachieving boys. Further to this, some preliminary primary research findings will also be used to assess the validity and accuracy of the secondary data already in existence, to ensure a variety of appropriate strategies can be trialled and tested with similar students moving forward. This is imperative not only because underachievement is significant in real terms, but "the failure of our brightest students to achieve their full potential at GCSE level is likely to have an impact on their subsequent achievement at A-level and entry to university" (Russell International Excellence Group: 2013).

One piece of literature which proposes a number of support strategies is the Sutton Trust-EEF Teaching and Learning Toolkit. This toolkit "is an accessible summary of educational research which provides guidance for teachers and schools on how to use their resources to improve the attainment of disadvantaged pupils" (Education Endowment Foundation: 2015), and whilst the strategies proposed have some limitations in terms of evidence validity, such strategies are a good starting point in trying to determine workable and effective proposals.

To ensure a concise and focussed analysis and evaluation, only three strategies have been chosen from the toolkit. These will be judged in terms of effectiveness in promoting and facilitating progression and attainment to counter the boys' current underachievement. However, further study would be useful to evaluate the effectiveness of additional strategies which have been proposed both by the toolkit and other similar authors. The three strategies chosen are aspiration intervention, behaviour intervention and one-to-one tuition. For the purposes of the paper, each of these strategies will be addressed individually in conjunction with both my primary research and existing secondary data.  Whilst there will be a main focus only on the effectiveness of aspiration strategies, the effectiveness and impact of both behaviour intervention and one-to-one support will be considered to provide comparative context for the wider range of strategies available.

The first of the strategies to be analysed is aspiration intervention. The Sutton Trust defines aspirations as something "children and young people hope to achieve for themselves in the future" whilst interventions are defined as "an approach to raising aspirations", where interventions have been categorised as one of three types:

- interventions that focus on parents and families;
- interventions that focus on teaching practice; and
- out-of-school interventions or extra-curricular activities, sometimes involving peers and mentors.
- Whilst each of these intervention types could be explored and evaluated individually, the intervention involving teaching practice will be the only intervention judged during this paper to ensure a continually focussed approach. Further research would therefore be required to assess the overall impact of aspiration interventions in terms of each intervention type and this will remain a limitation of this paper and its research.

In trying to evaluate the effectiveness of aspiration intervention, it is useful to first consider that a recent academic journal cited "a deeply embedded culture of low aspiration as a significant cause of antisocial behaviour and academic underachievement" (Stahl, University of Cambridge: 2012). Whilst this very much suggests the importance of high aspiration, the Sutton Trust-EEF Toolkit found

that "on average, interventions which aim to raise aspirations appear to have little or no positive impact on educational attainment", therefore directly contrasting Stahl's view. However, the Sutton Trust Education Endowment Foundation does acknowledge that their "evidence base on aspiration is weak", and that "more rigorous studies are required, particularly focusing on pupil-level rather than school-level interventions" (The Sutton Trust: 2015) and, as such, this must be considered when interpreting and considering the validity of the Foundation's findings. Likewise, Stahl does not cite how he has evidenced and justified his judgements, and so it would be further beneficial to evaluate Stahl's evidence to ensure that given judgements are not solely subjective.

In comparing the findings of Stahl and The Sutton Trust, two vital questions arise. The first of these is whether or not aspiration interventions have a positive impact on student attainment; Stahl suggests they do have a positive impact, whilst The Sutton Trust suggests otherwise. The second question which must also be considered, as highlighted by The Sutton Trust, involves determining whether pupil-led aspiration interventions are worthwhile or whether such interventions should instead be implemented on a whole-school basis. In summary, whilst aspiration interventions may or may not be effective, either on a pupil-led or school-led basis, it should also be considered that simply "improving the effectiveness of teachers would have a major impact on the performance of the country's schools, increasing the attainment of children across the education system" (The Sutton Trust - Interim Findings: 2011). As such, whilst aspiration intervention may be effective in promoting progression and countering underachievement, it must be remembered that the most effective way of countering underachievement may be to address cultural deficiencies in the longer-term by improving the overall effectiveness of teachers; therefore minimising the need for such interventions.

In order to substantiate the validity of Stahl's and the Foundation's findings, it is useful to also consider some additional research, which found that the "major concern to those involved in raising the achievement of White Working class pupils is the perceived lack of aspiration amongst parents for their children's education and future" (Demie and Lewis, Lambeth: 2014). Whilst Demie and Lewis' findings are in support of Stahl's, therefore suggesting some theoretical validity amongst these authors' findings, it is imperative that a number of limitations are considered when reaching an overall judgement on the research and literature reviewed. The first of these limitations is that one piece of the research used centred on underachieving pupils, whilst the focus of this paper is centred on underachieving boys. Secondly, Demie and Lewis' research interlinks a child's aspirations with parental aspirations, and whilst this could form the basis of further research, the focus of this paper is only on a child's aspirations.  However, to minimise the impact of the latter limitation, it is worth considering that many head-teachers highlight "a lack of education amongst white working class parents as a causative factor for low aspiration" (Demie and Lewis, Lambeth: 2014).

The second intervention strategy to be considered is behaviour intervention, whereby behaviour interventions are those which "seek to improve attainment by reducing challenging behaviour and general anti-social activities" (The Sutton Trust: 2015). In contrast to the Trust's findings on aspiration interventions, this research found that "evidence suggests that behaviour interventions can produce large improvements in academic performance" (The Sutton Trust). However, the research adds that the "estimated benefits vary widely across programmes" and that the effectiveness of behaviour interventions depend greatly on how targeted the intervention is to the specific needs of the student, with whole school strategies being less effective, thereby agreeing with the previous research which questioned the differences in pupil led and whole-school led approaches. Whilst there is less literature detailing the effectiveness of behaviour intervention, it is useful to remember that some academics have drawn detailed parallels between behaviour and aspiration interventions, as noted previously by Stahl who claimed that low aspiration was a significant cause of both antisocial behaviour and academic underachievement.  Furthermore, whilst

the effectiveness of behaviour intervention can be partially assessed in a school context by applying the intervention and then monitoring the impact, it must be remembered that "mainstream schools are not homogenous; they vary greatly in their social mix, levels of achievement and behavioural ethos" (Office of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector *in* Lindsay, Annual Review: 2007). The difficulty in establishing a benchmark between different schools naturally means that it is much harder to determine any tangible research results which could be applied to a context other than that in which they were determined. This, therefore, remains a limitation of this data and the subsequent primary data which will later be analysed: the results may be accurate, but are only relevant to the school where the research took place.

The third and final strategy to be considered is one-to-one support, defined by The Sutton Trust (2015) as a situation "where an individual pupil is removed from their class and given intensive tuition".  A number of researchers have claimed that such an intervention is effective, suggesting some theoretical validity. Similarly, The Sutton Trust-EEF Foundation found that "evidence indicates that one-to-one tuition can be effective, on average accelerating learning by approximately five additional months' progress". This is supported by "consistent and strong" (The Sutton Trust: 2015) evidence. Further analysis of this would, however, be useful to substantiate the Trust's claims of using consistent and strong evidence, but this falls outside of the scope of the paper as one-to-one support is not the main focus point for the research conducted. Whilst the Trust claims to have used consistent and strong evidence, it is imperative to note that the research adds that "there are fewer studies at secondary level" or for subjects other than reading and mathematics (The Sutton Trust: 2015). However, to support the evidence and findings of this research, it can be remembered that numerous parallels can be drawn between and amongst the quantitative and qualitative skills required for Business Studies with those required for reading and mathematics courses. However, as the research is not specific to Business Studies, it must still be remembered that a limitation exists in that the data may be inaccurate or incorrect on a subject-specific basis. In further agreement with my primary data, it is also worth considering that "developing a one-to-one relationship with children which they could rely on to endure over time" (Impetus Digging Deeper: 2011) was cited as an effective and successful method of supporting white working class boys facing distinctive barriers to educational attainment by every school who took part in a research study. This is particularly useful to consider as every school in the research study was a British secondary school, lending support to the focus of this paper. However, the limitation to this is that the strategy was proposed for all white underachieving children, as opposed to just boys. There is also a further limitation as the views of the secondary schools may be subjective, however, this limitation is minimised as there is theoretical validity amongst the eleven schools who all independently agreed with one another. Furthermore, the provision of one-to-one tuition falls outside of the remit of inclusive education, and this paper is primarily focusing on inclusive strategies.

The available literature is clearly of a conflicting nature and, as a consequence, I wanted to test the authors' strategies when applied to the two pupils I am supporting as the focus of this paper. I was keen to see which strategies proved to be the most effective. I therefore conducted a thorough background search into each of the student's abilities, prior attainment and current lifestyle characteristics, and this allowed me to determine that each of the two students fit with the Trust's definition of *'white', 'working class' and 'underachieving'*. In order to test the authors' proposals, I tested the three chosen strategies with each of the two students in a variety of contexts.

Student 1, the first student to be observed, has a target grade of C in mathematics, however performance grades of D and E were recorded in June 2014 and January 2015 respectively. The first piece of primary data from my tests was collected as part of an observed lesson for Student 1 in a GCSE mathematics class, however it must be noted that behaviour intervention has recently involved this student moving from a different GCSE class, and therefore the impact of aspiration

interventions may be difficult to measure accurately. During this lesson, a number of key observations were made which both substantiate and question the validity of the literature reviewed. On a number of occasions throughout this lesson, the student verbally communicated a 'can't do' attitude when confronted with challenging questions. Each time, the teacher addressed the student's concerns with comments such as *"I once found this hard" and "You can do this if you think about it".* These comments re-focussed the student and encouraged him to continue despite experiencing difficulty completing the work which had been set. In a similar lesson, the student made a similar comment about *"not being clever enough to do the higher tier revision work"* and as the class teacher was already occupied with an on-going unrelated behaviour issue, this comment could not be addressed. On the occasion where the teacher initiated an aspiration intervention, the student was able to re-focus and complete the work, compared to the other instance where the student simply shut off and became disengaged. It was clear that regular aspiration interventions facilitated progression and countered underachievement. The student was able to meet the *'all' (grade E) and 'most' (grade C)* differentiated outcomes which had been stipulated in the first lesson. However, a limitation exists in that previous behaviour intervention may have contributed towards this. The student did not meet the *'most' (grade C)* differentiated outcome as expected in the second lesson, therefore lending support to Stahl and Demie and Lewis' research, but contradicting The Sutton Trust that found aspiration intervention ineffective.

Student 2 was observed in a similar setting and is performing consistently at a D grade, despite a C grade prediction in GCSE mathematics. Like Student 1, his lesson involved regular aspiration interventions to ensure consistent focus and engagement. In this instance, the class teacher used analogies and anecdotes. My observation records from the lesson noted that these interventions were effective, enabling him to overcome his low aspirations whilst meeting the C and D grade outcomes. Where aspiration interventions were absent, the student became disengaged and assumed an inability to complete the work, whilst only fulfilling the D grade outcome. This suggests that greater progress could be made to address underachievement in the instances where interventions were used. However, further longer-term observations would be beneficial to determine any additional factors which may influence his progress. As with Student 1, my primary research findings from this observation lend support to the views of Stahl and Demie and Lewis. Whilst it can be seen that aspiration interventions were effective on this occasion, it must be asked how a host teacher can realistically offer individualised aspiration interventions within an inclusive context where there are a number of other students who must also be catered for. This interlinks with Farrell's research and as such it would be beneficial to monitor the effectiveness of aspiration interventions in both an inclusive and individual context, thereby forming the basis of possible further study.

To further substantiate my interim findings, I then taught Students 1 and 2 together in a subject specialist setting. The research data collected from this observation further supports the findings of the previous mathematics lessons and the views of Stahl and Demie and Lewis. Throughout this BTEC Business Studies lesson, regular aspiration interventions were planned for Student 1, whilst none were planned for Student 2. To ensure accurate comparison, a nil baseline for both students was confirmed prior to the strategy impact being measured. Confirming baselines was notably useful, as prior knowledge differences are a limitation of this comparative element of research, and although still existent, the minimisation of such has improved the overall accuracy of my findings. Student 1 remained continually focussed throughout the lesson and had evidenced fulfilment of the *'all' (grade pass), 'most' (grade merit) and 'some' (grade distinction)* outcomes, despite having a merit prediction with a performance grade of pass. In contrast, Student 2 failed to fulfil the *'most' (grade merit) and 'some' (grade distinction)* outcomes, despite having a merit prediction. The student had, in this instance, continued to underachieve by maintaining a performance grade of pass. As all observation records have noted the effectiveness of aspiration intervention, the validity

of the claims made by Stahl and Demie and Lewis can be upheld. However, it should be considered that a spice scale was aligned to each of the differentiated outcomes, which may have encouraged self-challenge. The impact of this intervention may therefore be offset by this element of self-challenge from either, or both, of the focus students.

My primary research has also investigated the effectiveness of behaviour intervention as an alternative strategy for addressing underachievement. Whilst aspiration intervention forms the key focus of my research, it is useful to consider an alternative strategy to provide some comparative context. In support of The Sutton Trust findings, observations of Students 1 and 2 evidenced a positive correlation between behaviour interventions and attainment and progress.

On one occasion, both students were seated together and finding it difficult to remain focussed. Each student was then separated and it was noted on the observation record that this resulted in greater focus and engagement. Students 1 and 2 both fulfilled the *'some' (grade distinction)* outcome, despite having a merit prediction and a pass performance grade. Similarly, Students 1 and 2 were observed in a similar context with a cover teacher, however, in this instance, behaviour interventions were not implemented until half way through the lesson. Observation records note "significant disruption during individual work" and "continuous disengagement" throughout the first half of the lesson, therefore inhibiting progress. In contrast, and in support of the Sutton Trust, records noted that the students became "engaged for the later part of the lesson" when behaviour interventions were used. These findings further support the validity of existing data which claims a positive correlation between behaviour intervention and attainment. Further substantiation of this validity was evidenced in a series of additional contexts where additional behaviour interventions, behaviour for learning objectives and seating plan strategies were used and seen to contribute towards progress and attainment. However, these factors could be further explored in greater detail in a future study which focuses specifically on behaviour intervention.

Finally, through further lesson observations and support sessions, the impact of one-to-one support was tested in relation to raising attainment. Whilst it must be remembered that one-to-one support sessions are not inclusive, it is important to note that, in support of The Sutton Trust, observation records suggested an intrinsic relationship between the provision of individualised support and the raising of attainment. However, further study would be required to measure the impact of one-to-one support on a longer-term basis. On one occasion, records noted that one-to-one support appeared very effective in re-focussing each student whilst ensuring greater focus throughout. Similarly, in a separate context, it was again noted that, in agreement with the findings of Impetus and The Sutton Trust, one-to-one support appeared to encourage and facilitate greater progress and attainment. However, on both these occasions, further investigation and evidence collection would be required to fully substantiate the authors' views and my preliminary research findings.

In summary, a number of conclusions can be drawn from the research collected and the literature reviewed. Whilst it is clear that a number of journals and researchers have conflicting views about the effectiveness of aspiration interventions, theoretical validity was still evident which underpinned a general consensus that aspiration interventions were, to at least some extent, effective in promoting progression and attainment for white working class underachieving boys. This theoretical validity was then further substantiated with primary research data which further agreed with Stahl and Demie and Lewis. However, additional research would be useful to investigate the effectiveness of aspiration interventions with further consideration given to minimise the number of limitations previously identified. It would also be useful to investigate the impact of aspiration intervention in a varied and contrasting range of schools in order to determine the transferability of the research between settings. Whilst a better understanding of aspiration intervention is clearly useful in terms

of personal strategy development, it would be particularly interesting to further investigate its effectiveness in such a varied range of contexts.

Additionally, the effectiveness of behaviour intervention and one-to one support was examined, and although these intervention strategies do not form the main focus of this paper, they are still useful to consider so that some comparative context exists. In conjunction with a number of researchers and journals, alongside my primary data collected from observation and teaching records, an interim consensus was reached on the effectiveness of each strategy. Whilst there was theoretical validity amongst researchers, academics and my primary data, regarding the effectiveness of these two strategies, further study would be required to collect further evidence and address the range of limitations associated with the research thus far. It would also be useful to determine further how the effectiveness of these strategies varies between schools and their contexts. However this interim consensus is a useful starting point which I am keen to take forward and build upon in future study.

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