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Raising the Achievement of White Working Class Pupils in Schools: Barriers and School strategies

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Background

This study aims to examine the key barriers to learning and the school strategies to raise achievement of White British pupils with low income backgrounds. Class is still a strong predictor of life chances in Britain. Previous research suggest that the worryingly low achievement levels of many white working class pupils have been masked by the middle class success in the English School system and the Government statistics that fail to distinguish the White British ethnic group by social class background (Demie and Lewis 2010). Despite the concern, there is little research into the achievement of white working class in mainly multicultural schools where schools are preparing children to live in a multiracial society by giving them an understanding of the culture and history of different ethnic groups to reflect the communities they serve (see Demie and Lewis 2010; Mongon and Chapman 2008; Strand 2008). However, in recent years the need for detailed case studies of the barriers to learning and school strategies in raising achievement has become apparent as a means of increasing our understanding of the ways in which schools can enhance pupils' academic achievement. The key challenge is to find out what successful schools are doing to address the underachievement of white working class pupils.

Research Questions

Key questions raised in the research include:

- What are the factors contributing to underachievement?
- What are the strategies used for raising the achievement of white working class?
- What are the implications for policy?

Methods

The methodological approach for this research comprises of case studies of selected schools, focus group interviews and large scale attitudinal survey. The empirical investigation is supported by an ethnographical study of the school and home experiences of white working class pupils. Details of the methodological framework are summarised below:-

First, using an ethnographic approach, detailed case study research was carried out to study the school experiences of White British pupils including the reasons for underachievement. A structured questionnaire was used to interview headteachers, teachers, parents and pupils to gather evidence on barriers to learning, how well White British pupils are achieving, pupils' views about the school and its support systems. Thirteen schools were selected for case study.

Secondly, parent, pupil, governor and headteacher focus groups were also carried out to ascertain their views and to identify whether their experiences mirrored the views of those participants in the case study interviews.

Thirdly, a pupil attitudinal survey was carried out using questionnaires to ascertain pupils' views and opinions on school and learning and aspirations for the future. The survey data was completed by 2000 pupils.

Such combination of data collection methodologies gives a complementary view of the research problem in the study of the same phenomenon. It is also lead to greater validity and reliability of the evidence than single methodological approach.

Frame

The framework for analysis was structured around the key questions that guided the research. By systematic analysis of each case study in depth interviews and long-term meticulous observations, it became possible to generate good data and to understand and elucidate the barriers to learning and the strategies we found to be most effective at supporting the white working class pupils. Interview was triangulated with additional data from focus groups and attitudinal survey to explore the voices of the various stakeholders in their education and to validate whether their experience mirrored the views of those participants. Overall, by in depth systematic analysis of case study findings and triangulating the data and linking pupils experience to their GCSE outcomes, we are able to identify the barriers to learning and examples of good practice in raising the achievement of white working class pupils in schools.

Research findings

This study confirms that one of the biggest groups of underachievers is the white working class. One of the main reasons for pupil underachievement is low aspirations from their parents regarding education and social deprivation. The root causes of underachievement have also been identified within factors such as low literacy levels, feelings of marginalisation within the community, low level of parental education and lack of targeted support to raise achievement. . However, despite underperformance at national level, in a number of case studies schools, the white working class pupils buck the trends. There are a number of reasons why white working class pupils are doing well in the school. The study identifies a number of strategies to overcome some of the barriers to achievement which face white working class children in schools, such as successful leadership that recruit effective diverse workforce, parental engagement, rigorous monitoring systems which track individual pupils' performance against expectations; personally tailored support, flexible intervention programmes ; effective support for pupils on the move from primary to secondary school, and effective targeted support through extensive use of teaching assistants and learning mentors. These schools spent much time in providing support using a range of strategies targeting all underachieving groups. The case study findings are also supported by governor and parents focus groups and the results of the pupil attitudinal survey. These findings and policy implications are discussed in detail in the paper.

The study concludes that the main obstacle in raising achievement is the Government's failure to recognise that this group have particular needs that not being met by the school system. The paper argues that the government needs to take a stronger lead by providing additional ring-fenced funding to assist schools to support targeted local initiatives to raise achievement. This additional resource should be used to provide social, emotional and educational support for pupils and their families to raise their aspirations.

References

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