

17th June 2014

Tackling White Working Class Underachievement: Research highlights barriers and strategies to raise achievement

Social deprivation and the low aspirations of parents have fuelled low achievement among white, working-class pupils in England, a study carried out in the London Borough of Lambeth has revealed.

The research, to be unveiled at a conference in London next week, also found that the low achievement of many white working-class pupils has been obscured by middle-class success in the English school system. The authors warn that the failure of Government statistics to distinguish the white British ethnic group by social background has also masked the problem.

Details of the study come as MPs on the Education Select Committee prepare to publish their report into Underachievement in Education by White Working Class Children, on Wednesday 18 June. Feyisa Demie, Head of Research and Statistics at Lambeth Council, gave evidence to the inquiry.

Dr Demie's new research, carried out with Dr Kirstin Lewis, a lecturer at Goldsmiths, University of London, draws on detailed statistical analysis as well as evidence from parents and community focus groups and schools case studies.

The study confirms that one of the biggest groups of underachievers is the white working class and their outcomes at both Key Stage two and Key Stage four are considerably below those achieved by all other major ethnic groups at national level. The national data shows that 32% of White British pupils eligible for Free School Meals (FSM) achieved 5+A*- C grades at GCSE, compared with 65% who are not eligible for FSM. The gap is 33% compared to smaller gaps for all other ethnic groups.

One of the main reasons for pupil underachievement is low aspirations from parents regarding education, and social deprivation. The root causes of underachievement have also been identified within factors such as low literacy levels, curriculum barriers, feelings of marginalisation within the community, low level of parental education and lack of targeted support to raise achievement.

However, despite underperformance at a national level, the research has found that white working class pupils in the case study schools in Lambeth are bucking the trend. In Lambeth the proportion of white FSM pupils reaching the Key stage 4 was almost 50% compared to 13% in Peterborough, 20% in Slough and the England average of 31% (DfE 2012). In one primary school, despite challenging circumstances and low attainment at entry, 100% achieve level 4 and above. Overall the gap between FSM and non-FSM pupils is very narrow in Lambeth.

Schools have adopted a number of strategies to overcome the barriers to achievement - such as strong and visionary leadership, an inclusive curriculum, rigorous monitoring, and targeted interventions to challenge poverty and underachievement through extensive use of teachers, teaching assistants and learning mentors.

The study concludes that 'the main obstacle in raising achievement is the Government's failure to recognise that this group have particular needs that are not being met by the school system.'

Cathy Twist, Lambeth Director of Education, Learning and Skills said: 'In Lambeth we are committed to ensuring all pupils, whatever their background reach their full potential. This report highlights a range of strategies used to raise the achievement of white working class pupils in schools. I hope the Government and schools across the country can learn something from this extremely important piece of research.'

Feyisa Demie, Head of Research and Statistics at Lambeth, said: 'The underachievement of White Working Class pupils is a key concern and a problem facing educational services.'

To tackle the underachievement the DfE needs to take a stronger lead by providing additional ring-fenced funding to assist schools to support local initiatives to raise achievement.'

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A national conference to discuss the research findings with schools and policy makers will be held on June 27, at Institute of Education (University of London), 20 Bedford Way, London, WC1H 0AL.

For further information about the conference and the research findings, contact Feyisa Demie at fdemie@lambeth.gov.uk

Notes for editors

1. The research was carried out by Dr. Feyisa Demie (Head of Research and Statistics, Lambeth LA) and Dr. Kirstin Lewis (Lecturer, Goldsmiths, University of London).

2. The findings are published in a series of reports which are available at <http://www.lambeth.gov.uk/rsu/research-reports> after their launch on the 27th June 2014.

If you would like access to these findings before then, please contact Feyisa Demie fdemie@lambeth.gov.uk.

3. The list of the conference speakers and programme on 27th June 2014 are available at:
http://www.lambeth.gov.uk/rsu/sites/www.lambeth.gov.uk/rsu/files/Educational_Underachievement_of_White_Working_Class_Children_Flyer.pdf

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