

Exploring the experiences of a white, working class boy through the use of a narrative methodology

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Abstract

Department for Education statistics published in 2014 show that white, British boys in receipt of Free School Meals (FSM) are the lowest performing group of boys from any ethnic group, based on the number of pupils achieving five A - C grades at GCSE level including Maths and English or the equivalent. This paper utilises fictional ethnography to explore the themes of gender, social class and the curriculum and how they relate to a white boy from a working class background who is in receipt of FSM. Through the use of narratives in the form of diary entries, these three themes are explored from three different perspectives: his teacher, his mother and the child himself.*

The aim of this paper is to illustrate how one child and his circumstances can be perceived differently by these key figures. It also explores how the educational experience of a child can be influenced by his circumstances, and how within a given demographic, there are those who don't fit the particular stereotype and are exceptions to the rule.

The conclusions drawn from the research used in this paper suggest that in the majority of cases the social class of the child and whether or not they are from a disadvantaged background will affect their attainment at GCSE level (DfES, 2014). There is a positive correlation between boys and their poor achievement in English (Donald, 2013, Jones & Myhill, 2004) and also their social class and behaviour and attitude in the classroom (Jones & Myhill, 2004, Roberts, 2012). However, although the majority of research surrounding white, working class boys relating to these issues is negative (Cassen & Kingdon, 2007, Centre for Social Justice, 2013, Donald, 2013, Jones & Myhill, 2004, Reay, 2001, Roberts, 2012), it does not mean that a boy from that background will necessarily underachieve.

Introduction

Department for Education statistics published in 2014 show that a mere 26.9% of white British boys in receipt of free school meals (FSM) achieved five or more GCSEs including English and Mathematics at grades A*-C, or the equivalent. Not only did I find those results alarming when I looked at them in isolation; when I compared them to the results of their peers who were not in receipt of FSM, of whom 60% achieved the same grades, I was shocked. I was taken aback by the huge difference in the levels of achievement between the two groups, and concerned that those results meant white British boys in receipt of FSM are the lowest performing group of boys from any ethnic group.

As the parent of a white, working class boy, I felt this would be an interesting area to explore for the purposes of this journal paper. Until now, I had never considered the effect his background, gender or social class had, or might have, on his academic performance, choosing instead to just support him and help him fulfil his potential. From the age of 2 ½ years when he started nursery, he has always exceeded the average expectations for his age, so the issue of underachievement has never arisen for us and he is on track to equal the GCSE results of his peers. I wanted to look at things from the point of view of a working class child in this paper, to discover just what the typical child from this background experiences and how their education and achievement are affected by their gender, class and circumstances.

I decided to create a child, Noah, to base this paper around. He is a thirteen year old boy from a working class background, attending a comprehensive school for boys, in a less affluent area of England. He is an only child in a single parent family. Contained within this paper are three diary entries, written by Noah's teacher, his mother and Noah himself. They explore the themes of gender, social class and the current and proposed changes to the curriculum and provide a snapshot of things as they were in 2013. I thought it would be interesting to create three different personas and link them all through one child and his circumstances. I hope it will provide interest for the reader and will show how one child and his set of circumstances can be perceived so differently by people who have significant roles in that child's life.

Methodology

My decision to explore the topics of gender, class and the curriculum in this paper was confirmed when I came across the Department for Education statistics and realised my own son should fit into that particular group of poorly performing children. I researched the themes in more detail and chose to utilise an ethnographic fiction approach to present my findings. I felt by using this method, which is where the writing is based on factual research and presented from a particular point of view in the form of a story, it would make this paper both interesting and accessible to audiences beyond academia (Jacobsen and Larson, 2014). This type of approach has been used effectively in other areas of research (Chung & Bernak, 2013 and Sparkes, 1997), and as an effective tool for increasing understanding and appreciation of the life experiences of others (Chung & Bernak, 2013). Although it does not appear to be a widely utilised method of research in general, I discovered it worked well when applied to education and especially when exploring the themes in this paper. I chose to have one child at the centre of the story and use his voice and the voices of two others, to explore how his experiences in education could be influenced by his gender, social class and the curriculum. This helped to provide continuity between the themes and enabled the individual pieces of factual information to be put into context and be linked and interrelated throughout the story. As a child's teacher and parents are two of the most important and influential people in his life, I wanted to include how they might consider the child and his circumstances from their own perspectives. Likewise, I felt it was important to give the child himself a voice, to illustrate not only how the curriculum and its proposed changes might affect him, but to show that an adult's assumptions of how a situation may affect the child can easily be different to the child's own thoughts about the

situation. Through the use of ethnographic fiction, I had more freedom to explore the characters in greater depth and include thoughts and feelings that a real participant in a study might indeed experience but not feel comfortable to share with a researcher. I could also link different perspectives on important issues through one child, something that would be difficult to do with more traditional research. However, there are limitations to this method of presenting research. The characters are my creation and therefore the way they interpreted the factual research within their individual stories is subjective, and, as they are fictional, the validity of their experiences could be questioned.

Teacher's diary

If only you could turn back time armed with the knowledge you have now, and speak to your younger self. I would grab myself by the shoulders and shake myself until the ridiculous notion of becoming a teacher had been removed from my young, naïve little head and been replaced with plans to study Law, or Medicine or just anything else.

But you can't. Unfortunately.

So here I am, two years into my teaching career, spending eight hours a day at school where a good day is where I have a single lesson where I am not sworn at and a bad one doesn't bear thinking about.

I knew St Bartholomew's School for Boys had its issues and was deemed to be a challenging place to teach when I applied for the position here. But full of confidence in myself having come through the private school system, and having the ludicrous idea in my head that a good degree from a decent university would equip me with the skills to single-handedly turn things around and make a difference to the lives of these deprived children, I took the job as Year 8 tutor and English teacher. Boys underachieve in comparison to girls anyway¹ but I had hoped that I could buck the trend and make a difference. Unfortunately my specialism is English and that just makes my job even harder. Boys can't do English² and we know they struggle from an early age with writing.³ In addition, the majority of my pupils are from disadvantaged households as they are in receipt of Free School Meals;⁴ many have behavioural problems and none of them wants to be sat in a classroom learning anything, let alone something they find difficult and something society and the media tells them they can't do.⁵ All these factors make my job as 'teacher' almost impossible.

There are the odd few children who don't get quite as involved in the disruption as the other boys and there are fewer still who seem to actually want to learn and try

¹ Jones, S. & Myhill, D. (2004) 'Troublesome boys' and 'compliant girls': gender identity and perceptions of achievement and underachievement, *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 25:5, 547-561.

² Donald, A. (2013) Reinforcing gender stereotypes: how our schools narrow children's choices. The Guardian, 9th December, 2013.

³ Jones & Myhill, (2004) 'Troublesome boys' and 'compliant girls': gender identity and perceptions of achievement and underachievement. See note 1.

⁴ Department for Education, (2013) Disadvantaged pupils - what you need to know.

⁵ Donald, A. (2013) Reinforcing gender stereotypes. See note 2.

to do well. It's this little group of boys, who emit a glimmer of hope and promise, that are the reason that after two years of abuse and disrespect I am still here. Take Noah for example. He's a quiet boy, but he shows more potential than most. He might be one of the 26.9% of white British boys receiving FSM who get five GCSE's at grade C or above.⁶ He might even end up at University. Probably not a top University, as only 0.5% of boys like him on FSM actually manage to get three grade A's at A level⁷ but he isn't destined for failure like many of the others are. He is different, atypical if you like, in that he is keen to work, keen to produce; he is articulate and has good manners and doesn't often get involved in silliness.⁸ There are, though, as you would expect from a thirteen year old boy, some small episodes of high jinks occasionally. He doesn't go in for the macho behaviour that lots of the other boys do. In his 2012 paper, Roberts states macho behaviour has been theorised as the basis for boys' rejection of educational values. He refers to a study by Willis in 1977 which explored how and why working class 'lads' got working class jobs. The study found that the boys interviewed and observed developed a 'counter school culture' which saw them resist the formality, authority, obedience and discipline of school, which they exhibited through their language, behaviour and actions. It also saw them reject learning as they saw it as a threat to obey and conform. As students, they felt there was more value in practical, manual skills than in learning and knowledge, and regarding employment, it found they placed less importance on mental labour and were more inclined to prioritise physical, manual labour as it was seen as masculine. It seems they were exhibiting behaviours in school that they felt they should exhibit as adults. They don't choose manual work because they aren't capable of mental work, because they could do it if they desired. It just seems that's the done thing. It's possible these traits and values are passed down through families and become engrained in their beliefs as just what the men in their families do.

Maybe Noah's not being like that comes down to him being an only child and growing up with just his mother. He wouldn't have a male role model, if you could call it that, to copy the macho, arrogant behaviour from, although that contradicts the 2007 report by Cassen & Kingdon, published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation which states 'indicators of disadvantage, such as receiving FSM, the neighbourhood unemployment rate, the percentage of single-parent households and the proportion of parents with low educational qualifications, all measured in the immediate area round the student's home, are also statistically associated with low achievement'. I'm not sure how much of an impact it has had in his case, though. All I am certain of is that I am extremely grateful for the odd few like him that make me feel my purpose in the classroom is more than just crowd control. And that I am failing him.

I feel so awful, so guilty that I cannot control his peers enough so their behaviour does not impact on his progress. I often wonder, as I lie awake at night unable to sleep, how much more he and the others like him would achieve if they were not in an environment where they felt they couldn't perform at their best for fear of ridicule

⁶ Department for Education, (2014) Statistical First Release, GCSE and equivalent attainment by pupil characteristics in England, 2012/13

⁷ Hinsliff, G. (2009) How private schools ensure a life of privilege for their pupils.

⁸ Jones & Myhill, (2004) 'Troublesome boys' and 'compliant girls': gender identity and perceptions of achievement and underachievement. See note 1.

or bullying from their peers.⁹ How far could he go towards realising his full potential in a nurturing and supportive classroom? I can only wonder about how well he could do if he was in a class where I could actually spend fifty minutes in the hour teaching and ten minutes getting the class to pay attention and settle down, rather than things being the other way around. The Schools White Paper published in 2010 recognises the impact poor behaviour has in the classroom on the achievements of pupils and on the willingness of teachers, both newly qualified like me and older, experienced teachers, to remain in the profession. It states it will 'increase the authority of teachers to discipline pupils by strengthening their powers to search pupils, issue detentions and use force where necessary.' It's a nice idea, but realistically, in my classes if I even contemplated the idea of searching or restraining a pupil (most of whom are twice my size and could easily overpower me) I would have a riot on my hands. And as for detentions, they just don't turn up for them as it is.

I don't know how to make things better for Noah and those like him who want to learn, who are the reason I turn up to work every day and are keeping me in this profession, for the time being at least. I do know that someone, somewhere needs to address the problem and soon, before we have a generation of men from lower income backgrounds, who have been failed by the education system because of nothing other than their gender.

I guess all I can do, though, is my best.

Mother's diary

My Darling Noah,

For the first time in my life I have decided to keep a journal. I am not sure yet if I will ever let you see it, what form it will take, whether the entries will make much sense or even if there will be more than one of them.

I just want you to know from the start that I am immensely proud of you, everything you do and the young man you have become. I never imagined that you and I would be on our own together though. I had the vision in my mind of being a happily married middle class housewife and stay at home Mum with at least three or four children and a dog. The thought of being a single parent never even entered my head, and I certainly didn't plan on you being an only child. But sometimes in life, as you will surely discover yourself in time, even the best plans can change in an instant when you least expect it.

As you know things between your father and I deteriorated beyond the point of reconciliation when you were just a toddler. When that happened, I promised us both that being in a single parent family, as far as I could ensure, would never be a disadvantage to you. Single parent families have a certain stigma attached to them. People have assumed that the less than flattering stereotype of a dishevelled mother, dragging around a string of dirty, snotty nosed children, swilling beer, smoking and feeding them on chicken nuggets and chips is an accurate one, and

⁹ Roberts, S. (2012) 'I just got on with it': the educational experiences of ordinary, yet overlooked, boys, *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 33:2, 203-221.

even the Centre for Social Justice¹⁰ published an article that suggested because a father is absent, the child is more likely to end up with little education, abuse alcohol and drugs, be involved in criminal activity and become a teenage parent. I didn't want you to be burdened with those labels or judged by those standards as I didn't want you to suffer self-esteem issues now, or in the future as a result. I know the devastating effect they can have on a person, both at the time and for years to come.

Although we had moved out of our own home into a rented house and didn't have the same holidays and luxuries as our friends anymore, I still tried to instil the same values and morals into you, and made sure we didn't fit the stereotype. I didn't then, and don't now, see why politeness, courtesy, kindness and good manners need to be characteristics exclusive to the middle classes. And just because we live in a council house, why we should be grouped with the 'Chavs' who condone brash and loutish behaviour?¹¹

I think one of the most important things a parent can give their child, apart from love, obviously, is access to a good education and support and 'scaffolding'¹² to achieve their potential at whatever academic level that may be. And this is where I feel guilty. If I had persevered with your Dad and decided not to leave him, you wouldn't be at St Bartholomew's School now. You were on the waiting list for a wonderful nursery and we lived in the catchment area for one of the best primary schools in the county. Your father and I had even briefly discussed sending you to one of the independent schools in the area, if he got promoted. You would be at an outstanding school, benefitting from the privileges you so deserve. Instead, you went to the local primary school and then on to St Bartholomew's, where the only things outstanding are the boys who have been sent out of the class and are standing in the corridor in disgrace.

Working class single parents are represented as failing to provide adequate support for their children at school¹³ and being working class has a negative statistical correlation with educational success.¹⁴ I know the Department for Education¹⁵ says working class boys are the lowest performing ethnic group, but really, these views are not accurate or to be adhered to. And in fact much of the evidence to suggest working class boys are at a disadvantage can be disputed.¹⁶

As you move up through secondary school now and start to make decisions about your future by considering different careers, choosing options for GCSEs and the like, I just want you to know that the only barrier to getting on in life is you allowing yourself to be held back. Albert Einstein once said:

¹⁰ Press release, June 2013.

¹¹ Bennett, J. (2013) Chav-spotting in Britain: the representation of social class as private choice, *Social Semiotics*, 23:1, 146-162.

¹² Wood, D., Bruner, J., & Ross, G. (1976) The role of tutoring in problem solving. *Journal of Child Psychology and Child Psychiatry*, 17, 89 -100.

¹³ Standing, K. (1999) Lone Mothers Involvement in their Children's Schooling: Towards a new typology of maternal involvement, *Gender and Education*, 11:1, 57-73.

¹⁴ Ingram, N. (2009) Working-class boys, educational success and the misrecognition of working-class culture, *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 30:4, 421-434.

¹⁵ Department for Education, (2014) Statistical First Release. See note 6.

¹⁶ Ingram, N. (2009) Working-class boys, educational success and the misrecognition of working-class culture. See note 14.

“I am thankful for all of those who said NO to me. It’s because of them I’m doing it myself.”

If society or the media or even people are telling you that something is not possible because of your upbringing or because you are from a working class, single parent background, remember Einstein’s words and go out and achieve your goals and aspirations and prove those who say ‘NO’ to you wrong.

Follow your dreams Sweetheart; they’re yours for the taking.

All my love,
Mum xxx

Noah’s diary

This diary is the property of me, Noah Hope, and its contents are secret. Well, actually they’re not *really* secret, but it sounds cool!

I am thirteen years old. I like James Bond, reading, playing football, Manchester United and Alice who catches my school bus in the morning! She doesn’t go to my school, because it’s a boy’s school, but she goes to the girl’s school down the road and gets taught by nuns! She says they look like penguins as they hurry down the corridors! Ha ha ha!

We had to write a diary in English last week and I quite liked doing it, so I thought I would keep one at home too. My teacher said it would be good to keep one as it means we practise writing and that would help us when it comes to exams and coursework next year.

I quite like school, apart from the boys that mess around all the time. Miss was nearly crying in English today though as they just wouldn’t listen and a couple of them started swearing at her. I don’t know why, she’s a nice one really; she just lets them get away with too much. Although I do feel sorry for her. She chats to me sometimes as we do our work and she asked me what I wanted to do when I left school. I said I wasn’t sure, but that I wanted a good job. I said I don’t want to be a loser. I want to do well in my exams and go to college and maybe even university. Miss asked if I found the work hard and I said not really, but I don’t try too hard else I’ll get ribbed for being a geek. It’s not good to be a geek or a trouble maker, so I do just enough to stay in the middle of them both.¹⁷

Miss reckons I can do well in my exams if I try hard. She says it will be difficult because most of the kids here don’t care and can’t be bothered and the teachers spend more time trying to sort them out than teaching us. But that’s not my fault, she says. My Mum said the same thing Miss did, too, that the hard work will be worth it in the end. Me and Mum are like best friends, we are an awesome team! We left my Dad when I was two and we have been on our own together ever since. Mum says just because Dad doesn’t live with us, it doesn’t mean I can’t do well in life. Mum

¹⁷ Roberts,S. (2012) ‘I just got on with it’: the educational experiences of ordinary, yet overlooked, boys. See note 9.

says the best way to get to where you want to be is by getting good results at school and combining it with the desire to keep learning. I'm happy with that!

Apparently that education bloke Michael Gove is changing the exams again which will make things even harder, she says. He made a speech to Parliament in June where he said he was going to stop giving us coursework and make sure we do proper exams and make sure we have more knowledge about the subjects we learn about like History and English. And he wants to make Maths and Science harder. He said it's to 'better prepare pupils for life after school.'¹⁸ Secretly, I don't mind too much. I like maths, (my Mum is good at maths too, I've got her brain!) and I like science and I've got a really good memory so like Miss said, if I try hard, I will be alright. I feel sorry for Mike though, he's my best mate. He's not too clever and he will struggle with exams. It would be much better for him if he could do coursework. When he leaves school, he will go and work for his dad as a mechanic, he doesn't need to have loads of exams. What's the point of him doing them anyway if he is going to do badly? It's just going to make him feel terrible.

I saw on the news the other day that Mr Gove wants us to be the best educated people in the world and that there is this PISA table that ranks how well we are doing against the rest of the world. Apparently it tests fifteen year olds in Maths, English and Science. This time round, England is at number twenty-six! That's rubbish! Shanghai is at number one.¹⁹ It said on the BBC website that 500,000 children from 65 countries took part.²⁰ Then I started thinking, if you divide 500,000 by 65, that means only about 7,692 people from each country take part on average (see, told you my maths was good!) AND, if you assume there are 200 pupils in a year group, that means only 38 year 11 groups in each country (on average) took part. That's ridiculous! Mum says that's nowhere near a large enough sample size to be able to generalise the results to the whole country, never mind for us to show ourselves off to the world! And how do we know which schools took part? We could have got such a bad place on the list because they used thirty-eight rubbish schools like mine! I might write to him and tell him to get the posh kids to do the tests next time because they perform better than us working class kids!²¹

Michael Gove has been slated in the news again recently as the Scandinavian countries were near the top of the PISA table and he wanted us in England to copy some of their ideas, but now they are doing worse than they were, he is being put under pressure to defend his decisions.²² It does make me wonder though, if I can see it's not sensible to make huge changes to something as important to the country as its education system, based on what other countries do, when we have international league tables that only sample a tiny proportion of the population, and I'm still a kid, why can't he? Maybe he's just not as smart as a thirteen year old! Maybe it's his job I want to do when I grow up?! It seems I could probably make some better decisions right now than he does, so just imagine what I could do when I get to his age...

¹⁸ Gove, M (2013) Oral statement on education reform, 11th June, 2013.

¹⁹ PISA 2012 results.OECD, 2013.

²⁰ Coughlan, S. (2013) Pisa tests: UK stagnates as Shanghai tops league table.

²¹ Reay, D. (2001) Finding or losing yourself?: working-class relationships to education, *Journal of Education Policy*, 16:4, 333-346.

²² Warrell, H. (2013) Michael Gove defends Scandinavian-inspired education reforms.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to explore three different themes, while relating them all to one set of circumstances. I hope the three separate pieces came together and helped to show Noah and the effects of his circumstances from several angles. I think the view I put across is that although the white working class, low income boys are the lowest achievers of five A* - C grades at GCSE, this statistic doesn't necessarily apply to everyone within that demographic, nor does it have to apply to people who are in it. I now appreciate my experiences of having a son who falls into that group may not be typical, and am relieved my personal experiences haven't been negative in the slightest. My own personal opinion is that my son will be supported to the full extent of his needs, in any aspect of life, regardless of his academic ability or our social status as opposed to being told 'this is what you can aspire to' and just accepting it. Obviously this isn't the case with all families though.

The research I found was mostly quite negative about this group of boys (Cassen & Kingdon, 2007, Centre for Social Justice, 2013, Donald, 2013, Jones & Myhill, 2004, Reay, 2001, Roberts, 2012). There was only one article I came across that challenged the stereotype and provided evidence and reassurance that your social status need not condemn your son to a life of failure and underachievement (Ingram 2009), although that not to say there aren't others. I think this influenced my writing and Noah's circumstances and opinions more than I had anticipated, as to begin with I envisaged a more serious and gloomy portrayal of both. I do think that there should be wider coverage in the media and more research into working class boys who exceed expectations as the constant negative reports could prove detrimental to their self-esteem or confirm the beliefs they have that they are destined to underachieve.

The deployment of an ethnographic fiction approach to explore these themes worked well. By using this type of narrative approach, it is possible to reflect upon theories and ideas within a specific context and it allows us to make sense of the world as we perceive and experience it (Sikes and Gale, 2006). It allows an easier understanding of the themes discussed than might have been the case with a more quantitative paper. There are, of course, limitations to using a narrative approach. The use of only three perspectives in this paper offers limited opportunities for generalising the findings to a wider population; however, this could be a criticism of all qualitative research. Also, as the characters are fictitious and used as a method for delivering the findings of previous research and other literature, queries could be raised over the validity of this approach.

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