

Abstracts

Keynote lecture 1:

Reconciling educational success with working-class masculinity: identity struggles for teenage boys

Dr. Nicola Ingram, Lancaster University

Working-class masculinity is often pathologised and associated with anti-school, anti-feminine and macho attitudes rendering working-class boys as culturally ‘wrong’ and in need of fixing. Through a study of working-class teenage boys in two schools in the one community in Belfast I challenge and complicate these assumptions by exploring the struggles of negotiating both success and identity. It is argued that instead of considering working-class masculinity as a problem per se we might turn the spotlight onto the way that schools can often misrecognize and threaten working-class culture. This threat can create a pull on identity (or ‘habitus tug’) and this paper will present a typology for understanding the different ways in which this can play out for working-class boys. The approach to the research is within a feminist paradigm where the experiences of young men are elicited from engagement with a female researcher, providing a glimpse of young men’s worlds that previous work on masculinity has failed to capture. The thoughtful and reflective responses from the young men can also be seen as facilitated by the shared class experiences of researcher and researched. Drawing upon my deeply embedded understanding of what it feels like to be working-class, what it feels like to be considered ‘wrong’, and what it feels like to have your identity threatened, challenged, and eroded through schooling I, like Ward (2015), have developed a complex and nuanced approach to analyzing working-class masculinities and success, and my typology has been adopted by other researchers who have not had a class insight through their own experiences.

Keynote lecture 2:

Pathologizing the white ‘unteachable’: deficit discourses, normative practices and reflections on the white working-class experience in schooling

Dr. Garth Stahl, University of South Australia

In terms of education attainment in the UK, the white working-class remain the lowest performing ethnic group, and their academic underperformance has potentially ominous implications. There are many complex issues at play in understanding the white working-class experience in schools. Schools aggressively focused on raising aspirations and high-stakes testing adhere to a culture in direct conflict with historic constituted working-class values. Furthermore, through a narrow focus on attainment, these institutions can easily slip into deficit discourses. This presentation relays a personal reflection on my experiences through two access points (a researcher, a former teacher) working with white working-class students in formal educational settings between 2003-2011. Through the reflection, my aim is to: 1) critique normative schooling practices in the UK 2) make theoretical connections to how pathologization – both within schools and wider society – contributes to how the white working-class negotiate respectable learner identities and 3) consider the role the UK media plays in validating the ‘chav student’ as ‘unteachable’. Where whiteness often equates to power and entitlement, we must remember in many schooling contexts in the UK, whiteness can be equated with low-aspirations, stagnation and anti-educational stances.

Parallel Paper Session 1

Session A: Negotiating white working-class Aspirations

High aspirations on low-level programmes: understanding white working class aspirations in vocational education - Liz Atkins, Northumbria University and Simon Reddy, City of Plymouth College

White working class youth making transitions from school to work through vocational education are, both explicitly and implicitly, characterised in policy as having 'low' aspirations, (e.g. DfES, 2005; DBIS/DfE 2016). This characterisation forms part of a broader deficit model of youth (e.g. Atkins, 2009; Billett et al, 2010) and of the disadvantaged communities in which they are located. Drawing on two empirical studies and utilising a Bourdieusian theoretical framework, we contest this notion. Our paper explores the experiences and aspirations of white working class youth through pre-apprenticeship and low-level vocational training in coastal and urban contexts. We argue that young peoples' aspirations are influenced by neo-liberal policy rhetoric, and by aggressive marketing and management of Vocational Education which promises high pay, high skill returns (Reddy 2014; Atkins, 2010; 2016), despite considerable evidence that the returns it offers at level 2 (and below) are insignificant or even negative (e.g. Dearden et. al., 2004, in Wolf 2011; Keep, 2005, 2014; Atkins, 2016; McIntosh & Morris, 2016). Our data suggests that across geographical areas, students from white working class backgrounds consistently have high aspirations and often make significant sacrifices to 'get on' and 'make their own way' (Reddy, 2014) but most lack the cultural capital to achieve their original aspirations (Atkins, 2009). We conclude that recent modest increases in government funding, along with weak strategies for access to work experience, do little to improve the disadvantage that these students bring with them to the FE sector, or to facilitate them to achieve their aspirations.

'Cutting Rough Diamonds': the transition experiences of First Generation Students in Higher Education - Julia Hope, University of Kent

Presented is an analysis the experiences of a cohort of first-generation students in their first semester at a United Kingdom (UK) Higher Education Institution. The 'rough diamonds' are white first generation students aged under 25 from an urban coastal town. The study, on which this draws, tracked students as they negotiated their entry to a satellite university campus called 'The Centre'. The study investigated and analysed their experience(s) of moving into and taking up a university place, and engaging in their first semester of undergraduate study. The findings suggest that the students' experiences of transition were a complex interplay between becoming, being and achieving as a higher education student and their own cultural and social identity. Financial, motivational, social and emotional issues which can all affect academic success (Pritchard & Wilson, 2003) were evident. A 'transition' model (Hope 2014) is proposed to explain how these students navigate crossing the cultures of home and university, and to inform practice in relation to retention of first generation students. Whilst the transitions and adjustments vary between individuals, all students experience some level of challenge in their first semester. This is significant in the context of policy debates regarding higher education access and widening participation.

The Cultural Construction of the Student Consumer in Higher Education Policy Documents - Anwesa Chatterjee, Canterbury Christ Church University

There have been important changes in the structure and approach of higher education policy in the UK in the last few decades. At the time of the Robbins Report (1963), higher education was still restricted to an elite group of students, and major policy recommendations revolved around arguments for public funding towards Higher Education. The primary emphasis was on social responsibility rather than individual responsibility and it was reasoned that progress in higher education was linked to progress in society. Over time, Higher Education policy has shifted gear and justified the changes to fees and the regulation of universities in terms of promoting social mobility for individuals. Graduates' higher earning potential has been used as a defence for the renewed focus on individual responsibility and an expanded higher education and tuition fees. Through an analysis of Higher Education policy documents from 1963 to the present day, we examine the changing cultural script of 'the student', and draw out some implications for the widening participation agenda.

Session B: Policy and Privilege?

Qualified for What? - Geoff Payne, Newcastle University

Although social mobility is often seen as inter-personal competitions in the education obstacle race, where white working children are disproportionately unsuccessful, three perspectives are needed to complement this. First, the 'race' extends after formal schooling, in charity and governmental schemes intended to increase work-related skills. Unfortunately these set a high achievement bar: few can succeed, because the schemes misrecognise the full disadvantages of potential participants. Second, some schemes, together with powerful agencies, deploy a discourse explaining lack of success in terms of failings of 'character', 'resilience', 'aspiration' and other psychological 'qualities'. Thus victims are blamed for their own victimhood; for failing to display middle class cultural attitudes which supposedly explain the success of those born into advantaged families (Lawler and Payne, *Social Mobility in the 20th Century*. 2018 forthcoming, Routledge).

The perceptions and lived experiences of a group of academically successful white working class young men within education - Mary-Claire Travers, University College London, Institute of Education

Concerns continue to be expressed about the persistent underachievement of white working class boys (Sutton Trust, 2016) but this paper takes a different approach to the matter by exploring the perceptions and views of 15 white working class males who have been successful in school and moved onto higher education. The paper draws from a longitudinal study in which the participants were each interviewed three times over a period of almost two years. The study drew on Bourdieusian concepts of habitus, field and capital (Bourdieu, 1992). While the participants came from families who generally encouraged their sons' educational success, their parents did not always have the cultural, economic or social capital needed to make wider educational opportunities available to their children (Siraj and Mayo, 2014). Schools and teachers needed to breach this gap and the role of some individual teachers was pivotal to the academic success of the study participants (Matthys, 2013). Each participant could recall important interventions that teachers made in their educational trajectories which had made a difference to their aspirations and eventual attainment in school. The conclusion reached by the participants was that teachers have the potential to interrupt and transform the habitus of the individual thus influencing the academic achievement of white working class boys.

A Critical analysis of the ways that 'Social Mobility' is constructed in Conservative Educational Policy Messages (2015-present time) - Chris Carpenter, Canterbury Christ Church University

It has been widely proposed that social inequality in the UK is severe and getting worse (Wilkinson and Pickett 2009; Jones 2012; Dorling 2015). Furthermore it is argued that at the present time social mobility in Britain, for most people, is static and perhaps even in decline (Erikson and Goldthorpe 2010; Connolly 2015). The idea that education should promote social mobility has been a well-established policy motif in the educational policy messages in recent times. Social Mobility appears to have been a malleable policy platform as New Labour used it as a means to promote equality while the Conservative party employed it to advocate for individual achievement (Payne 2017). Social Mobility tends to be constructed only in terms of upward mobility and politicians seem to ignore the idea that unless resources and opportunities are unlimited then for there to be upward mobility there has to be corresponding downward mobility (Giddens 1998; Erikson and Goldthorpe 2010). In the 1980s the Conservative government set in train a set of reforms which fundamentally reconstructed the relationship between the state and the welfare system (Garratt and Forrester 2012). The reform was based on the idea that public services could be most efficiently and economically provided in a free market often referred to as neoliberalism. This set in place principles underpinning public service provision that inform political thinking to this day. One of the consequences of this was that parents, carers and children became recast as consumers and the purpose of education was presented more as a need to provide an effective workforce rather than a social entitlement. What has also been significant has been that the old political ideologies of 'right' and 'left' have become 'flattened' and replaced by forms of identity politics (Driver 2006; Schwarzmantel 2008) and neoliberalism has become an ideology that was adopted in some form, by all governments since the 1980s. Indeed in 2005 Tony Blair claimed that, "Education is our best economic policy" (Bower 2016). In this paper it is argued that social mobility, as constructed in Conservative educational policy messages (2015-present) is couched principally in terms of unlocking potential, as a matter of equity and as a means to create human capital. However, with each of these there are possible consequences which are problematized in this paper.

Parallel Paper Session 2

Session A: School quality and White working-class experience

The limits of labels and measures. Exploring the use of formative assessment to measure social and emotional learning, mindset and character traits in Blackpool - Emily Lau and Wendy Cobb, Canterbury Christ Church University and Zoya Wallington, Right to Succeed

The Fair Education Alliance is a coalition for change in education comprising of leading organisations from across the UK. The Alliance works collectively to lead the fights against educational inequality. The Working Group focused on Impact Goal 3, Character, Emotional Wellbeing and Mental Health has been working hard over the last twelve months to offer the best guidance to schools about understanding the emotional wellbeing of their students. Using case studies from the work of charity 'Right to Succeed', we will look at their experiences working with schools in low-income communities in Blackpool. The approach there has been based on an understanding that while we spend a lot of time labelling young people as disadvantaged, there is nothing that we can do about this disadvantage. What we can do, however, is offer ways of understanding their strengths and weakness (cognitive, social, emotional and physical) and help them consider how they make the most of their strengths and how they can learn to cope with challenges. Right to Succeed's work exposes some of the holes in the evidence base that exist, particularly in understanding which emotional competencies can lead to different, more positive outcomes in young people, all evidence to date in education tends to focus on knowledge and its manipulation, but our case study is based on a more rounded view of a child's development. The Fair Education Alliance is campaigning for all schools to make social and emotional learning an integral part of education.

Meeting the challenge: The experience of schools serving areas of greatest need - Catherine Meenan, Teach First

Teach First is a charity which seeks to break the link between socioeconomic background and educational opportunities and outcomes. Initially working with schools in London, the charity now supports new teachers to work within schools serving low-income communities across England and Wales. To better understand the challenges faced by new teachers, we conducted a series of case studies in areas with high deprivation and low educational outcomes: Blackpool, Leeds, Wolverhampton and Walsall, and South Wales. In addition, a comparison study was carried out in Hackney. The studies involved semi-structured interviews and focus groups with 361 young people and professionals. In order to understand how different systems have an impact upon the lives of young people, the data were qualitatively analysed using Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory as a framework. This paper explores how local areas may influence schools and teachers' perceptions of the young people they teach, and the approaches they take to meeting the needs of their students. It also examines how young people experience their local areas, and the barriers and opportunities they perceive. A theme which emerged was a contrast between what teachers said about the low aspirations held by their students and the ambitions of the young people we spoke to. The influence of attitudes towards education, quality of careers guidance and the impact of social and economic changes within an area are considered as alternative explanations for the often poorer educational outcomes of young people within white working class communities.

Session B: The Coastal and the Importance of Institutions

'Oh I do like to be beside the seaside': opportunity structures for four un/underemployed young people living in English coastal towns' - Hazel Reid, Canterbury Christ Church University.

This paper draws on a recent publication by Hazel Reid and Jane Westergaard that illustrated the lived experiences of white working class youth once they had moved out (or dropped out) of education and into unemployment. Their aspirations were curtailed by their immediate experiences and location. An investigation into social justice for those living in coastal towns in the UK asserts that 'cities have come to embody how we view modern deprivation and poverty. Yet some of the most pronounced disadvantage in the UK exists away from the big cities' (Centre for Social Justice, 2013). This is supported by Ward (2015) who argued that many seaside towns are hotspots of social exclusion. Her work also reveals how problems connected with houses in multiple occupancy (HMOs) exacerbate exclusion in many seaside towns. This finding concurs with Smith

(2012) who also highlighted that coastal populations in the UK are under-researched in terms of studies into social exclusion, transient populations and disadvantage. His study concluded that the social and economic consequence of such concentration of disadvantage leads to fragile communities. The qualitative study described in the paper focuses on four young people living in Thanet and Dover. The analysis suggests that their experiences in education and employment markets are shaped, negatively, by their particular location and the ongoing opportunity structures. The paper outlines their views and discusses the three main themes that emerged from the analysis: opportunity structures, supported resilience and the impact of living in a coastal town.

Fields of Endeavour: Social Mobility and the British Armed Forces - Linda Cooper and Alex Cooper, Anglia Ruskin University

The demographic of those who join the British Armed Forces consists predominantly of young white men, often from poorer post-industrial regions and, in the less technical branches of service, tending towards those with lower educational attainment. However, many thrive within the Armed Forces and achieve positions of authority and reward, while others continue with their original, lower, socio-economic trajectory. We consider differing potential outcomes, dependent on individual aspiration and engagement with professional development opportunities whilst in Service. The concepts of sociologist Pierre Bourdieu are used to explore how social and cultural capital accrued within the Armed Forces can engender social mobility, including access to private schooling for children, higher earnings potential and geographical agility. We also draw on findings from a pilot study for an intervention model for ex-Service people who find themselves in the criminal justice system. We use the data from this study to consider how a lack of mobilisation of capital on transitioning back into civilian life can hinder prospects beyond military service. Acknowledging the influence of external factors, we suggest that pro-active individuals who accrue capital in Service and apply it appropriately in new fields increase their chances of success within and beyond their Armed Forces career.

“I couldn’t wait to leave...just get through the exams and get out”: White working-class young people’s experiences of schooling in Edinburgh Charlotte McPherson, University of Stirling

The lifestyles, life choices and fate of young people have long been of pivotal concern to governments and policymakers, who are keen to ensure the development of a morally responsible and economically productive future generation. Attracting particular attention are the transitions of deprived youth, who are deemed to be most at-risk of deviating from or ‘failing’ at the idealised linear pathway from education to employment, and thus of being ‘not in education, employment or training’ (NEET). These perceptions are rooted not only in the lower educational attainment rates of deprived youth, but also in the powerful, enduring social construction of white working-class youth as apathetic troublemakers who possess little interest in their futures. Indeed, narratives of youth have long carried the message that marginalised young people routinely give up on their lives. This is not only problematic because it demonises young people, but because it diverts attention away from the role that powerful institutions, including the compulsory education system, play in shaping and facilitating the aspirations and transitions of deprived youth. The often uneasy, unproductive relationship between working-class young people and school has long been documented in quantitative and longitudinal research, with a particular focus on the long-term implications of this for attainment, future earnings and even physical and mental health. There has been a relative lack of qualitative engagement with working-class young people’s experiences and perspectives of schooling, however, and of research which prioritises the here-and-now above a longitudinal approach which prizes a focus on adult outcomes.

This small-scale study with 9 economically deprived young people in Edinburgh addresses these gaps and challenges powerful assumptions about disadvantaged youth as society’s have- and will-nots. It presents a group of young people who are highly aspirational and optimistic about their futures, and who feel a powerful sense of control over their lives. However, the study also uncovers a deeply felt mistrust of schools and teachers by two-thirds of the participants, who had either left, or planned to leave, school by age 15 or 16. For these young people, school represented another institution in society which did not trust, value or understand them. There was a pronounced and articulately expressed sense of anger with the schooling system amongst these participants, who felt their academic difficulties or personal insecurities were either misdiagnosed as laziness or troublemaking or were ignored entirely, rendering them invisible. The study also revealed the role of both youth services and further education colleges in successfully countering many of these problems for the participants, who felt valued, trusted and respected by these institutions and who, most importantly, began to progress towards achieving their aspirations.