

Is Anybody Listening?



Engaging and promoting achievement for white working class students

A group of Year 7 girls from Elizabeth Anderson School celebrate the success of their *Midsummer Night's Dream* performance.

From *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to issues of identity, Emma Simpson explores a project designed to see what works in English for under-achieving white working class students in a multicultural borough.

The engagement and achievement of white working class students has been a national concern for some time. In Islington, a multicultural inner London borough, White British students make up roughly 20% of the secondary school population. Most of these students, according to both crude and more subtle measures, are working class. And year after year, across the curriculum, they are one of the lowest performing social groups. A couple of years ago, the Heads of English did more than throw up their hands in despair; they asked me to research on their behalf and use my findings to do something, at least in English.

I found that quite a lot is known about the factors which affect educational success for this (non-homogenous) group. From these insights derive a

number of possible strategies, but no magic wand. It is, of course, part of a much wider social issue about equality and justice, about the class ridden history of our country, about competition for ever scarcer resources, about social fragmentation and changes in labour markets, about the reproduction of dominant social structures.

A daunting context. Yet what we do in our classrooms does impact on individual students and make a difference to their educational experience. With this in mind we formed a project group, found some funding and put together a programme which involved teacher training, inspirational talks from practitioners who had made significant headway in this field, and a series of collaborative planning sessions.



A Midsummer Night's Dream

Fast forward to the summer term when Year 7 in one school embarked on their study of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Parental engagement comes up again and again in research into white working class achievement and is more complex than might first appear. All parents want the best for their children but many may not have the skills, knowledge, confidence or resources to support academic endeavour. England's school system embodies middle class values such that working class students can experience a disjunction between their school and home lives. If compounded by parents' own negative school experience, it can lead to a feeling of alienation for both generations.

Yasemin Hazine, the teacher heading the *Midsummer Night's Dream* unit, wanted all participants to feel that Shakespeare is fun, relevant and accessible. So at the heart of the unit she designed a homework booklet to be completed with a parent/carer which encouraged a joint learning journey and acted as a bridge between home and school. In the classroom, Royal Shakespeare Company approaches were used to enable students to inhabit the language and world of the play, to actively engage and find individual meaning. Ultimately, each class took responsibility for one scene and the unit culminated in a promenade performance of the play, across various sites within the school, to which parents and carers were invited.

It was a great success and has become a highlight of the school calendar. But not without challenges. Not all students completed the homework booklet consistently and, in the evaluations, even some students who wrote about how much they had enjoyed the scheme maintained that they were not looking forward to studying Shakespeare in the future: ingrained expectations stronger than lived experience. This year, Yasemin will consult both current Year 8 and 7 students to find out how the homework booklet idea could be improved. All students' feedback will be taken on board but the comments from white working class students will be particularly noted and acted on if possible. This year, each teacher will also complete a case study of one or two of the target group students in their class to capture what they notice about when they are most engaged and any visible barriers.



EGA girls capture a delicate moment in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

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A sense of identity

One headteacher has observed: *‘If a Muslim girl goes to university, she is still a Muslim girl. If a white working class girl goes, she risks losing her working class identity.’* Issues of identity are frequently complex, as is the thorny issue of social mobility and, with it, the discourse surrounding aspirations. Whilst all students, regardless of their background, should have the right, and be supported, to aim for any career, it is important that the academic route isn't automatically privileged over other options; that in seeking to 'aim high' the system doesn't implicitly criticise those who may choose not to. As Tawney put it, education should be a space that *‘people seek out not in order that they may become something else but because they are what they are’*. The system should allow students to internalise a positive sense of a working class identity, not just seek to escape it.

One school worked with Year 10 students on an *Identity* scheme of work which encouraged reflection about influences and values as well as personal history. For 14 selected students (over 50% of who were from the target group), it culminated in an Arvon residential creative writing trip to Devon.

This was a high cost, but extraordinarily high impact part of the project: when the lead teacher shared the poems, pictures and anecdotes from the trip, tears welled around the table. The students are now setting themselves up as writing mentors for younger students and teachers are working out how to widen impact when the whole project runs again.

A poem written by a Year 10 student who had become increasingly withdrawn since the divorce of his parents. He had not spoken about it until the Arvon creative writing residential trip when he wrote this poem.

The Divorce

Before the divorce I was a lighthouse,
a building that walking on water.
But something changed, my mother
no longer matching her sentence to his,
Secretly losing faith in the order of things,
like pleading with a traffic warden.
Arguments would hide what he was really thinking.
Writing things that sound like the future,
that stopped yesterday morning,
after nine hours of sleep. My face blank
in the sun's glare. I interrogate diaries,
labels, lists and old photographs for a man
more father than my father, but I am at sea
as I watch these former lover birds in our kitchen,
dancing like two cracked eggs in a source pan.
Before the divorce I was a lighthouse,
a building that walked on water, but now I just sink.

“It feels like a real conversation has started, as though teachers are thinking in proactive and creative ways, as if the voices of these students are beginning to be heard.”

Identity was also the focus of a Year 7 project in another school, where white working class students are very much a minority. The scheme equipped students to interview people from the local community, including family. Work on questioning asked ‘what questions encourage people to open up about their experience?’ which helped students think about and share their own narratives, as well as those they went on to interview outside the classroom. The unit culminated in a crafted narrative in which the interviewee was descriptively introduced and their words then shared through both direct and indirect speech, as does the Gentle Author of *Spitalfields Life*.

Collaboration, agency and voice

This year we have widened the scope of the project to encompass other subject areas. Whilst English still predominates, there is a maths parent/student evening planned which aims to give parents a taste of forward thinking, thought provoking maths teaching, make maths feel accessible and fun and provide a goody bag of maths puzzles which families can take away to do together at home. Importantly, the preparation of this evening will be done through careful consultation with students and parents, ensuring that their voice is heard in how the evening is promoted and organised.

For me, agency is a thread which runs through all the factors identified by research; if people feel they have power, control, a valued voice, they are more like to engage. A few years ago, researchers at Royal Holloway developed a model for collaboratively writing a book. It began as a project between IT and psychology experts but its success has resulted in the formation of a charity which uses the process to promote social equality as well as to make available transformative writing experiences for all. A key finding was the generative power of giving students the locus of control, as well as the social and emotional benefits of working intensively and creatively as a group to overcome challenge and celebrate success.

Several Islington schools ran this Collaborative Writing Project when the model was first made available, often with startling success. This year therefore, one school is using the white working class funding to work with this charity to run a project with a mixed group of KS3 students who are all bright, but lacking in confidence with the written word. They start with just their ideas on Monday and have a published book, available on Amazon, by the time they go home on Friday. Apparently, no student who stays to the end of the first day is absent for the rest of the week, not even those with attendance issues.

Two other schools are planning schemes of work which place agency, choice, responsibility and relevance, at their core (*Romeo and Juliet* for Year 10 and *Point of View*, a non-fiction writing scheme, for Year 9). Yet another intends to set up a Community Writing Group, involving parents/carers as well as students, facilitated by skilled practitioners but led by the interests of the group. This is partly inspired by NATE's own National Writing Project which has given rise to Teacher Writing Groups all over the country, seeking to change the way we relate to writing, to see it as a tool of agency and voice, and enable teachers to take part in that journey alongside their students.

And finally...

Forward thinking education and social policies are critical if the widespread underachievement of white working class students is to be addressed. However grassroots movements such as this, and the various projects which Islington teachers have embraced, shape our understanding through lived experience and do have an impact on students' relationship with learning. We are still a long way from making white working class students a group which thrive in English across the borough and across the curriculum. But it feels like a real conversation has started, as though teachers are thinking about it in proactive and creative ways, as if the voices of these students are beginning to be heard.

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