

Investigating the importance of effective strategies to raise the attainment of white boys in SIMD 1,2 and 3.

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Abstract

This research has been conducted as a result of my experiences as an educator working within both inner city and suburban secondary schools in Scottish education. These experiences have led me to observe that there may be a correlation between being a white boy in deciles 1, 2 and 3 of the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) and low educational attainment. Consequently, my research focused on the policies that currently exist to support improvements in attainment; strategies that arose from these policies; the data that could be used by educators to identify and target specific learners; and national research that had previously been carried out in this area. I carried out my research in the school that I currently work in and focused on an identified group of pupils that met the brief of my statement. Literacy became the key for this targeted group as it became obvious very quickly that without a clear focus, there would be too many aspects of this specific area to research; this would result in inconclusive findings. Mixed methods of quantitative and qualitative approaches were used and I kept a diary of all observations and interactions. My findings demonstrated that improvements could be made with a small and targeted group of pupils and that this can have a positive impact across the school as attainment can be improved. I also discovered that working with parents and carers to ensure that they are a part of their child's journey is imperative, however, as a classroom teacher, these opportunities are limited. Understanding the literacy skills of parents and carers is also an important part of pedagogy to improve literacy and consequently raise attainment. Raising attainment is a key focus of Scottish Education with dedicated funding to achieve this. However, targeting pupils not just because of their socio-economic background but also because of their cultural and ethnic background may also be key to raising attainment.

Introduction

The co-ed secondary school, in which this research is being conducted, is in a suburb of a large city and caters for approximately 1000 pupils. The houses in the school's immediate geographical area sit comfortably in the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) 8-10; however, the majority of the young people from these houses do not attend this school and instead travel out of the community to private schools (Scottish Government, 2016). Instead, the majority of young people in this school community come from economically deprived areas (SIMD 1-3) on the boundary of this school catchment area. The academic achievements of the small numbers of pupils, who do attend from the immediate economically advantaged area, create a noticeable contrast with the majority of pupils who attend from more economically deprived areas.

Class sizes average 30 pupils with classroom assistants available for pupils with diagnosed learning difficulties. A classroom assistant is expected to support 2-6 pupils per class. The Additional Support for Learning Department (ASL) will assist teachers by recommending strategies for pupils with Individual Action Plans. Developing strategies for these pupils also ensures that the principles of GIRFEC and SHANARRI attempt to benefit every pupil in the school (Scottish Government, 2012:3). However, this is not always the case. Instead, it is apparent that pupils who appear to benefit least from these strategies are white boys from SIMD 1, 2 and 3 who do not meet the requirements necessary for an Individual Action Plan.

As white boys from SIMD 1, 2 and 3 make up one of the largest demographics in this catchment area, this research will investigate the importance of effective strategies to raise the attainment of this significant group and make some attempt to understand why low attainment in this group may exist.

Background

There is currently no specific debate or research literature with reference to the importance of effective strategies to raise the attainment of white boys in the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation 1,2 and 3. However, there are numerous policies and documents which investigate the importance for improving attainment in children and young people through literacy. It is this literature which I will use as the foundation of my research.

Curriculum for Excellence is the bedrock of education in Scotland (Scottish Government:2008). Its aim is to enable opportunities for all children and young people to become successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens and effective contributors to society. It aims to achieve these goals by developing the knowledge, skills and attributes needed to be a global citizen in the 21st century. These skills are developed in eight curriculum areas, with literacy, numeracy and health and wellbeing recognised as particularly important. Although numeracy provides important skills in problem solving, digital skills and STEM development, literacy is recognised as fundamental to all areas of learning, as it unlocks access to the wider curriculum and develops critical skills for life and work. Consequently, attainment in literacy is essential for all learners.

The Scottish Government and Education Scotland work consistently to improve standards in education and close the attainment gap. Consequently, there are numerous strategies which focus on ending the poverty related attainment gap. The most recent strategy is the First Minister's Reading Challenge. The research carried out that supported the implementation of this strategy showed that reading *"is more important for a child's cognitive development than their parents' level of education"* (Scottish Book Trust). This suggests that regardless of a child or young person's socio-economic background, if supported to develop a love of reading, educational attainment and future life choices can be improved. This support must come not only from schools but from all areas across communities. However, if a lack of interest in reading exists at home; if parents or carers struggle with their own limited literacy; and if community libraries continue to close (Guardian, 2018) then schools are really the main instigators of this strategy. Consequently, the pedagogy in schools must not only attempt to improve the interest of children and young people, but also of families. This not only provides opportunities for schools but also the potentially daunting task of engaging families.

The policy which could assist in a home school partnership to improve literacy is Getting It Right for Every Child (GIRFEC). GIRFEC places the rights and wellbeing of every child and young person in Scotland at the heart of their education (2012:4). It also aims to work in partnership with parents and carers to provide support and services. Parents and carers are encouraged to be fully engaged in the rights and responsibilities that their child has, and

that they have. This partnership approach aims to ensure all needs are met as early as possible as working together will ensure support is provided, all developmental milestones are met, wellbeing is maintained and attainment of all is achieved.

Most recently, in February 2015, the Scottish Attainment Challenge was launched by the Scottish Government. Underpinned by Curriculum for Excellence and GIRFEC, its aim is to achieve equity in education so as to ensure every young person has the same opportunities in future learning, life and work. As a targeted programme, its key focus are areas in schools with the highest deprivation. These schools then receive funds to support identified pupils. By targeting these schools, the £750million funds available aims to close the poverty-related attainment gap, support children and young people to reach their full potential and consequently improve the life choices of those in these areas. Although a broad range of initiatives and programmes will be supported by the funds, improvements in literacy are a key focus of where funds should be spent by schools.

Likewise, Pupil Equity Funding (PEF) is allocated directly to schools and is being provided as part of the Attainment Scotland Fund 2016-2021. PEF is allocated according to free school meal entitlement of pupils in the BGE. To be spent at the discretion of the Head Teacher and working in partnership with the school community and the local authority, this entitlement should fund programmes which will close the poverty related attainment gap. However, if this funding was to be used with a focus on white boys in SIMD 1, 2 and 3, recognition of ethnicity as a contributing factor to low attainment would have to be established before funds were released.

A Scottish Government policy that does recognise ethnicity as a contributing factor of low attainment is *Improving educational outcomes for children and young people from travelling cultures* (2017). This policy provides guidance to educational establishments on how to engage and support traveller pupils and their families. The educational attainment of traveller children and young people is identified as an area that requires specialist support in order to improve educational outcomes and consequently life outcomes of this group. Engaging Traveller families in the educational journey of their child is at the heart of this policy. It understands that many families view formal institutions such as school as threatening (2017:40). Consequently, Traveller parents are encouraged and welcomed to participate in the life of the school and to become involved with their child's education and learning. Likewise, opportunities are created to engage parents in activities such as contributing to the curriculum; meeting teachers on a one-to-one basis; and support in home learning such as adult literacy classes, digital learning or parenting groups. Consequently, in 2015 48.1% of white gypsy/traveller pupils received ASL, compared to 22.5% for all other ethnicities combined (2017:13). This raises the question, why one group of white pupils can be targeted because of their ethnicity, but other white groups cannot.

Targeted support is similarly available for those with English as an additional language. This support is available by Education Scotland under the umbrella term English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL). This provision supports the language learning and literacy of a diverse range of children and young people who do not have English as a first language (Education Scotland 2015:4). This provision is focused on supporting community cohesion,

reducing isolation and promoting positive health and wellbeing. However, it achieves these goals by directing all to progress into further learning and the workplace; something which can only be achieved by first securing a high standard of language and literacy.

Although there is currently no literature that has targeted research on the attainment of white boys in Scotland, there has been some in England. The Institute for Effective Education carried out research on behalf of the Centre for Excellence and Outcomes in Children and Young People's Services (C4EO). It acknowledged that there were numerous key issues that impacted on why white boys are among the lowest performers in academic achievement in England. Socio-economic factors play a large part in this with the attainment gap between rich and poor backgrounds being apparent from as early as 22 months. This gap then widens throughout the education system and consequently has a huge negative impact on educational attainment in later school years (Sharples et al, 2011: 9). This research highlights the importance of recognising the multiple factors that negatively impact on children from their early years. However, it also emphasises the importance of recognising that being a white boy may also be detrimental to attainment; providing reason for similar research to begin in Scotland.

Research design and how was it conducted

Education Scotland state that children and young people benefit from targeted support, tailored to their individual circumstances. This individual support could be necessary because of barriers such as specific learning difficulties, social, emotional or behavioural needs. This targeted support could be at any point of their learning journey and should enable children and young people to seek more positive post-school destinations. Using this as a guideline, I used a mixed method research approach that involved a quantitative review of small group studies in school settings where targeted support was provided. This was supported by a qualitative review of policy, primarily from the Scottish Government and Education Scotland with some literature selected from relevant national studies.

When conducting this research, I ensured the quality and integrity of my research by attending to the following:

- I acquired informed consent from all those I spoke to.
- I respected the confidentiality and anonymity of my research respondents.
- I ensured that all participants voluntarily participated in my study.

As a classroom teacher who is teaching their maximum contact hours and has multiple whole school commitments I decided to combine my research with my recent qualification as a Nurture Practitioner. The Nurture Group I ran supported a small group of S1 pupils who met the brief of my research. The principle of Nurture, can be explained by examining Erikson's theory on the Eight Stages of Man; each of these eight stages must be developed to allow secure foundations upon which to build successfully (Mooney, 2000:38-39). Consequently, childhood is of primary importance as it supports the development of social, emotional and mental health; the foundations for all of life's wellbeing. Strong foundations

should result in wellbeing throughout life but weak foundations are created when humans fail to sufficiently develop at each stage. Consequently, if the earliest years of childhood are not sufficiently supported, that individual may suffer a pattern throughout their life of failing to properly flourish. The strengths that Erikson claims are essential for future development are: hope, willpower, purpose and competence. These strengths become the building blocks for success in later life as they develop social and emotional competencies. It is this that a Nurture Group is attempting to develop in children and young people, and as the Scottish government policies and research I had read suggested that a variety of socio-economic reasons could be the foundation of low attainment, I decided that nurture could be an important area to develop.

A key focus in this group was the development of language and literacy as a vital means of communication. According to Piaget, language is necessary to live meaningful and productive lives and without language young people cannot develop necessary literacy skills (Mooney, 2000:37). Consequently, a literacy project was implemented with this targeted group of pupils with the aim that it would provide skills for supporting literacy across all learning. A broad range of strategies were suggested and available for use, however, I focussed on ones that would be easily accessible by all abilities and used activities that directed towards skill development in reading, writing, listening and talking (See table).

Literacy Skill Focus	Strategy Attempted
Reading	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pupils are asked directed questions to support engagement of text. • Pupils are asked to predict what will happen next in a passage being read. They should link this prediction to prior knowledge of the text. • The text that pupils read is ‘chunked up’ with passages gradually increasing in complexity. • Pupils are gradually asked to read more demanding text to build up reading stamina. • Pupils are provided with a glossary of key words from the text to help recognise and understand new words and to consolidate existing ones. • Pupils are asked to identify specific key words, characters or phrases.
Writing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pupils are provided with a format for recording information e.g. Diagram, missing words, note making frame, poster etc. • Pupils completed learner diaries consisting of their thoughts and feelings of their progress in the group.
Listening	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Before a passage is shared, pupils are asked to listen for the answer to specific hook questions. • Pupil’s listen to each other’s response and feedback accordingly.
Talking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • After a reading activity, individual pupils verbally share answers to directed questions. • Pupils summarise short passages to create a ‘jigsaw’ which builds up a piece of text. • Pupil’s responses are discussed in pairs and then shared with the whole group.

Findings and analysis

It was evident from beginning this group that there would be huge challenges and that monitoring its success was going to prove very difficult. This was a variety of reasons.

- Even after research of existing literature I was unclear of a reliable method that would measure how successful the transferral of literacy skills developed in the Nurture Group across the school would be. Some of the reasons for this was that my research question potentially covered a very large area of pedagogy and I was either going to attempt to research too much or too little. Too much would result in too many strands to collate and too little would result in inconclusive results simply because of the small number involved.
- In order for a Nurture Group to be successful, it must be small. However, although a Nurture Group promotes a holistic approach to attainment and would allow me to consider socio-economic factors of pupils, using such a small cohort could falsely result in success simply because of the small number of pupils involved.
- It was unclear whether improvements in literacy across the school could be attributed solely to the focus provided in the Nurture Group.
- Although attendance in the Nurture Group required parental approval, it was not possible to include any measures to determine parent's or carers literacy. Even if it did, there could be no provision to provide any literacy support at home.

Consequently, I kept a diary of all findings which I then structured as my research. This diary consisted of:

- Feedback from pupils in the group consisting of their thoughts, feelings and answers to structured questions. This feedback could be based on either their literacy attainment or on their health and wellbeing.
- Feedback from the teachers who support these pupils in a variety of classes across the school. Again, this feedback could be based on attainment in class, the behaviour of the pupil or their observations on the health and wellbeing of the pupil.
- Feedback from Pupil Support teachers who could reflect on the impact of Nurture on behaviour of the pupils both across the school and in the local community. Pupil support teachers could also liaise with home and feedback from parents and carers.
- Reflections of research literature and Scottish Government policies.

I have grouped my findings under three subheadings which attempt to structure some of the findings gained.

1. The importance of raising pupil aspirations through interesting, engaging and inspirational programmes.

Interesting, engaging and inspirational content proved important to all pupils in order to raise their aspirations. This was because they could link their future ambitions to these programmes. Some pupils expressed that they would be likely to, or expected to, follow in the footsteps of their parents/carers and stated their socio-economic background would limit their life choices. However, when content in activities provided role models of successful figures that they could relate to, their aspirations improved. This suggested a correlation between a lack of role models and underachievement. This is a factor that was previously suggested regarding the low attainment of BME groups in Scottish education.

The use of technology also had a more positive impact within the group and improved retention. e.g. whole group activity using imbedded multimedia or individual chrome books. This was more engaging for pupils than a lecture approach and held pupil's attention. Pupils showed more interest which was noticeable by the questions they would ask in response to the audio-visual content and the written responses they would provide. If pupils, then practised their skills using an active learning approach their attention to the task was prolonged. However, their attention was most engaged when they were challenged to teach each other; they also showed a pride in their achievements doing this. However, the success regarding the approaches used was also possibly because of the small number within the group and the one-to-one approaches used, which is possible in a Nurture Group but not for a class teacher.

Consequently, one of the main implications for raising attainment in this group is of personalisation and choice and the ability to provide individual programmes of teaching which identify themes which will inspire and motivate learners. This raises noticeable challenges for classroom teachers who average thirty pupils per class and who have multiple teaching and whole school commitments. Individual support by well-trained teaching assistants could produce positive outcomes in raising attainment in this group but with limited school budgets this is unlikely. Consequently, even though early intervention is most effective with inspiring programmes, focussed on a small number of pupils, it would require dedicated resources in the form of staff.

2. The importance of engaging all parents and raising parental aspirations.

Some pupils reflected that making their parents proud of their academic achievement was an important factor. It was also important to this group that their parents or carers both showed interest in their educational attainment and were engaged in their school life. However, some pupils stated the opposite and claimed that parental engagement did not matter to them and that their parents or carers would not be interested in their attainment as they themselves had not performed well in school. This is in contrast to pupils from BME groups that I have previously supported in Nurture whose parents were supportive and engaged in programmes created to support their child's attainment. This is supported by Sodha and Margo (2010) who state that parental aspirations and attitudes towards education vary significantly according to socio-economic status but that ethnicity also plays

a role. They claim that this is because parental aspirations of some White British children are significantly lower than those in Black and Minority Ethnic groups.

Consequently, breaking the cycles between pupil and parent of low aspiration should be a key strategy for closing the attainment gap in this group. A strategy used in England in an area with a high proportion of white working class pupils is the Supporting Parents on Kids Education in Schools (SPOKES) home literacy programme. SPOKES is a 10-week course designed to help parents support the reading of 6-7 year olds. The initiative trains parents in developing skills of both decoding and meaning for beginning readers and is delivered through a combination of discussions, role-play and video demonstrations with parents, via home visits and family workshops. This is backed up with a telephone helpline to listen to parents' concerns and offer contact information with regard to routine services in the local authority. Evaluations of the SPOKES intervention programme have shown a significant increase in children's literacy skills, accompanied by a reduction in emotional conduct problems. The intervention has been found to be particularly effective for areas with a high proportion of low-income families. Research acknowledges that white working class underachievement is heavily linked to social, cultural and economic factors that are hard to shift, but also shows that good teaching and learning can be the biggest influence on the achievement of these pupils.

3. The importance for educators to be competent in the use of data which will benefit learners.

When attempting to use data that would assist me in developing strategies to raise the attainment of this group, it was very apparent of the limited information that was immediately accessible to me. It was also very apparent that I had no training to decipher the data and information that I was provided with.

However, a toolkit that is easily accessible is the Equality Evidence Finder (Scottish Government, 2019). According to it, in the 2011 census, 96% of Scotland identified as white and only 4% from a Black or Minority Ethnic group. And yet, in the 2016/17 academic session, 95.6% of all Asian school leavers progressed to a positive destination compared to 92.7% of White Scottish students. Likewise, the percentage of S3 White Scottish pupils achieving Level 3 or better averaged 90% in reading, writing, listening and talking. Comparatively, Black and Asian pupils averaged 94% in the same literacy skills. Considering the toolkit also highlights that Black and Minority Ethnic groups are more likely to be in poverty than White Scottish groups, this is a confusing statistic as it suggests that socio-economic backgrounds do not have to negatively impact on attainment and that being from a BME group may be a more positive foundation for attainment than being from a White Scottish one.

According to the Scottish Government interactive SIMD map 2016, Glasgow has 56 of the 100 most deprived areas in Scotland whereas Edinburgh has only 6. Comparatively, Glasgow also has the highest rate of violent crime such as serious assault and homicide, whereas Edinburgh has more crimes of dishonesty, such as housebreaking and thefts

(Express, 2017). A multitude of research already suggests the link between low literacy and crime. For example, the Shannon Trust state that 50% of prisoners in the UK are functionally illiterate with a reading age of 11 years or lower (Guardian, 2017). Consequently, it seems apparent that training teachers to use all available data and providing them with time and resources to use this information would potentially reduce crime rate and significantly raise attainment for all.

Conclusions

Some of my research suggests that it is a young person's socio-economic background and not necessarily ethnicity that is the determining their low attainment. However, other research is suggesting that ethnicity does play a part in attainment. Currently there is a relatively large amount of research in the UK analysing the link between poverty and attainment, and increasingly the link between gender, schools, geographical areas and attainment. There is also research on the attainment of BME groups. However, unless a pupil is from a travelling community, little if no research has been carried out that focuses on the attainment of white pupils. Instead it is up to individual teachers to attempt to use the existing data to identify pupils and determine effective strategies. Yet it is clearly important that in order to successfully meet the needs of this group, and provide them with the educational experience they are entitled to, engagement with parents, and full implementation of all the existing policies of the Scottish Government needs to occur.

In order to facilitate learner's needs, support for teachers is key to raising the attainment of this group of pupils. As BME pupils and Traveller pupils have been identified as having specific learning requirements, white boys in SIMD 1, 2 and 3 must also be identified as having specific learning needs; and these learning needs must be met. Classroom interventions must be well-specified and well-supported and incorporate extensive professional development for all educators who will be at the forefront of delivery. If teachers and support staff are able to use specific learning and teaching strategies attainment outcomes for this group should be significantly raised.

Parents and careers need to be fully engaged in their child's education and realise the importance for their child's future health and wellbeing. This should include educating and supporting parents where necessary. Some parents in SIMD 1,2 and 3 have had a poor experience of education and do not believe that there is anything to be gained from education as unemployment is likely to be the outcome anyway. Other parents have gone on to be successful despite their own poor education. This may make them believe their child does not need any qualifications to succeed in life. BME group parents who realise the importance of education for their children usually support the school and their child in order to achieve and attain. Their ambition for their child makes a positive impact on the educational experience of the young person and teacher. This needs to be emulated across all parents and carers as extensive parental engagement is key.

Research by the National Literacy Trust claims that there is a gap of 26 years in life expectancy between people with low literacy attainment and those with high literacy

attainment (2018). This is an outrageous statistic which clearly demonstrates the importance of raising the attainment of the identified group of white boys in SIMD 1, 2 and 3. They have a legal entitlement to have an education that meets their socio-economic needs and recognising their cultural identity as being white may be of benefit in achieving this. If implementing policy that acknowledges this will also result in extending the life expectancy of this group, then it is both legally and morally right that all educators and agencies involved ensure they have the skills and resources for it to happen.

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