



Underachievement in Education of White Working Class Children

A submission from the Association of Colleges and the Sixth Form Colleges' Association
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Background

1. The Association of Colleges (AoC) and the Sixth Form Colleges' Association (SFCA) represents and promotes the 341 Colleges in England incorporated under the Further and Higher Education Act 1992, including 93 Sixth Form Colleges and 247 Further Education Colleges which:
 - Educate 853,000 people aged 16 to 18, almost twice as many as school sixth forms. This includes 185,000 young people taking A-levels;
 - Train over one quarter of the total 240,000 apprentices aged 16 to 18;
 - Educate and train over two million people aged 19 and over;
 - Account for 33% of entrants to higher education and for 11% of those studying at undergraduate or higher national (for example, foundation degrees).
2. This submission from AoC and SFCA is based on telephone interviews with 11 General Further Education Colleges (GFEs) and six Sixth Form Colleges (SFCs). The individualised learner record (ILR) records students who live in ward postcodes that are defined as deprived through the index of multiple deprivation and eligible for 'ward uplift'.¹
3. This has been used as a proxy for working class. However this is neither an exact definition of poverty nor social class. Colleges do not routinely receive data from local authorities on school pupils who were in receipt of free school meals. In fact, in this small study, only two Colleges reported that they received this data from their local authority. All the students discussed in this evidence to the Education Select Committee were between 16-18 years old and the term 'White' refers to all students who are *White British, White Irish and White any other background* in the ILR.
4. **In summary, the key conclusions we drew from our discussion with Colleges are as follows:**
 - Educational underperformance is ingrained by the age of 16 whether the students are white and working class or not;
 - Colleges find there is little difference between the performance of working class students whether white or from a black & minority ethnic (BME) background;
 - Colleges report that there is some evidence that white working class students are more likely to come from families where there is intergenerational low aspirations.

¹ <http://www.thedataservice.org.uk/Services/DataCollection/software/disadvantageded-uplift/>

5. Number of Students in Colleges by ethnicity and deprivation

Ethnicity	From Deprived Area (Ward Based Uplift) Postcode	Total 16-18 learner responsive	%
White	191,900	682,800	28%
Black and minority ethnic	87,800	158,800	55%
Total	279,700	841,600	33%

The extent of white working class underachievement. Whether there is a difference between the performance of white working class young men and women.

- Evidence from Colleges in relation to this question was that there is no strong correlation between ethnicity and educational performance for 16-18 year olds. Students who are identified as deprived, either through free school meal information, bursary receipt or ward uplift, are often achieving at similar levels by the age of 18 as their fellow students who are not identified as being from a deprived background.
- A majority of Colleges felt there were more problems with underachieving boys than girls. In two cases respondents felt that young men got into more trouble because they were blunt and forthright and did not offer any excuses for their lack of engagement, whereas girls were able to communicate more effectively. Young men also did not tend to take work away from College - they did not like to be seen studying. However, there were some stark examples of girls significantly underperforming compared with their male counterparts. In a specialist NEET centre in the East Midlands, the young women behaved much worse than their male peers.
- There is some evidence that robust interventions at Key Stage 5 are working (see below).

The factors responsible for white working class pupils' educational underachievement, including the impact of home and family.

- The culture of the communities that some Colleges serve is an important factor. In some of the Colleges who participated in this research, students are from families where there are three generations of unemployment and where aspirations are low. This was seen as being more unusual in some BME communities where parental aspirations are often high despite in some cases being unrealistic.

10. Deprivation and underachievement can be tracked at every stage of a young person's educational experience. Students who do not master language skills at primary school are at a continuous disadvantage, and usually still behind in their educational achievement by the age of 16. This results in low confidence and poor resilience.
11. Parents who have not succeeded in education are unfamiliar with options for their children and may encourage them to leave education for low paid unskilled jobs. However, as many parents understand A levels, they are often keen for their child to only study this option despite it being potentially unsuitable for the young person's interests or aptitudes.
12. One of the key issues identified by Colleges is that many students do not appear to have learnt the skills at school that will support independent learning at the age of 16. In particular, coursework completed during class time does not help them become independent, self-motivated researchers. Schools also need to improve their use of role models, learning materials and advice and guidance for their students.
13. Poorer students often have nowhere to work at home and can lack social capital.

What steps General Further Education and Sixth Form Colleges can take to improve the educational outcomes and attainment of white working class pupils.

14. On the whole, Colleges do not provide specific support for underachieving white students and tend to provide additional help for all students regardless of their background.
15. A number of Colleges have done a great deal of work to raise the aspirations of their students. In County Durham, where the closure of coal mines in the 1980s has led to intergenerational unemployment, a College has focussed on developing their own system for tracking progress on courses, specifically in English and maths achievement – the essential elements for employability. This is to ensure that students are challenged to achieve rather than coast. The College felt they had become adept at retaining students but not at getting students to maximise their potential. Another College in the North West has introduced an 'E' grade for employment and enterprise which focuses on effort, attendance, timekeeping and customer care. In both cases they have seen their high grades improve.
16. In most Colleges, course tutors are expected to take students on trips/visits, encourage them to compete in national competitions and visit universities for lectures and residential events.

17. One College has greatly extended its work with employers this year – with 300 students working with employers over two days on a ‘Dragons Den’ style business idea development workshop, which is then followed up by live workplace assignments and job interviews over the next six months.
18. Colleges in this study have invested heavily to ensure that poorer students can get to College through subsidised or free transport. All Colleges reported that transport was an enormous issue for students from poorer backgrounds. Without access to affordable transport, young people can sometimes choose to attend their school sixth form, choosing an unsuitable option at 16, and then dropping out at the age of 17.
19. Two Colleges have set up charities to provide additional resources for the most deprived students. They support transport costs, the specialist materials and tools students need to buy, travel to work experience placements and specialist courses with universities. The specialist NEET centre based at an East Midlands College is also funded via a charity. It provides a well-resourced centre, good staff to student ratios and key workers who help students navigate benefits, health services and care systems.
20. Colleges have also invested in raising aspiration co-ordinators, learning mentors, opportunity coaches and attendance monitors. In one College, the staff in their specialist NEET centre, had been trained in motivational dialogue and specific strategies to help students take responsibility for their own actions. A College in Durham and a College in East London provide breakfast for all of their students, which has helped to improve punctuality.
21. Raising aspirations is a key issue. A Sixth Form College in the North West has a partnership with Cambridge University. Another College has a ‘Raising Aspirations Programme’ which has been designed collaboratively with a range of universities. The programme intends to increase the academic ambitions of current and prospective students encompassing everything from subject-led work with students from local schools, to lectures delivered by Russell Group academics. Colleges regret the demise of ‘Aim Higher’ which targeted students from backgrounds where there was no experience of higher education.
22. Colleges use ex-students as positive role models with current students, at open days and through their advertising and posters in the College.
23. However, Colleges do have to invest in this support. One College had spent between £1.5 and £2m on its support package and could only afford to do this because of its size and relatively larger budget. On average the majority of Colleges we spoke to spent approximately £100,000 on additional support.

The potential for a wider range of educational approaches, for example vocational pathways, to improve outcomes for white working class pupils.

24. Colleges reported that having a varied curriculum with academic subjects, vocational courses and apprenticeship opportunities ensured that students could make choices and not feel trapped in a pathway unsuited to them. All Colleges criticised the poor relationships they had with 11-18 schools where there was a tendency for schools to seek to retain young people for their own school sixth forms.

25. The performance of white students from poorer backgrounds on vocational courses was better than those on academic courses in FE Colleges.

What role Government can play in delivering improved educational outcomes for white working class pupils?

26. As explained above, Colleges report that there are no particular issues related to educational performance based on ethnicity. Therefore, we are not convinced that Government needs to take any specific action to improve the performance of white working class students aged between 16 and 18. However, the proposed actions below would improve the ability of Colleges to invest in education and training for all of their students:
 - Government should invest in the education of 16-18 students at the same rate as it does for 11-16 pupils. There is currently a difference of £1300 per student per year.

 - We would like to see DfE match BIS' investment in the National Careers Service. We also want Ofsted to prioritise careers guidance in inspections so that a school or College cannot achieve a 'good' or 'outstanding' grade unless its careers guidance was of a similar standard. In addition, clearly signposted career hubs that integrate the work of the National Careers Service with Jobcentre Plus in each local community would support access to advice for all young people and adults.

 - Subsidised or free transport to College and school for 16-18 year olds is a priority. Without it there will not be choice for students who come from the most deprived backgrounds.