

**Improving educational achievement among
working-class students: Evaluating a student-
mentoring scheme**

A short-form research summary

Improving educational achievement among working-class students: Evaluating a student-mentoring scheme

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Elena Gaschino is an undergraduate student in Criminology at the University of Lincoln. Funded by the Undergraduate Research Opportunity Scheme (UROS), Elena undertook an evaluation of a pilot student-mentoring scheme at a local secondary school, under the supervision of two members of academic staff, **Dr Anna Tarrant**, Senior Lecturer in Sociology, and **Mr Gary Saunders**, Lecturer in Criminology, School of Social and Political Sciences, University of Lincoln. Both have relevant expertise in relation to education (Saunders, 2017; Neary and Saunders, 2016) and young, working-class masculinities (Tarrant et al. 2015; Ward, Tarrant, Terry, Featherstone, Robb and Ruxton, 2017). Supporting the project at its initial stages was Isabel Wardby, another undergraduate student who carried out an individual interview with a senior member of staff at the school.

Abstract

This paper provides an account of a project which took place during the summer of 2018, and saw a team of researchers from the School of Social and Political Sciences at the University of Lincoln undertake a project funded by the Undergraduate Research Opportunities Scheme (UROS). The research consisted of an evaluation of a student-mentoring scheme, which was piloted between 2017 and 2018 at a local secondary school and saw undergraduate students from across the university volunteering as mentors for boys between Years 7 and 9, who were perceived to be underachieving in their subjects. Implemented by a senior member of staff at the school, the student-mentoring scheme wished to provide the boys with the extra support they needed to overcome the structural barriers they currently face on a daily basis. Together with the positive role models, the scheme was designed to help mitigate their experiences at school. It also aimed to uncover the issues that prevent these boys from realising their potential, in order to address them within the mentoring.

The student-mentoring scheme proved to be of benefit to the boys it engaged with both in the way they perceive education, and also addressed the way they behave during lessons and in the school environment. However, the research also identified various areas in which the student-mentoring scheme can be improved. This paper provides a summary of the evaluation of the student-mentoring scheme, focusing on its background, adopted methodology, and how the data were analysed. The paper concludes by outlining recommendations for future iterations of the mentoring scheme.

Introduction

In May 2018, a team of researchers from the School of Social and Political Sciences at the University of Lincoln, funded by UROS¹, undertook an evaluation of a student-mentoring scheme at a local secondary school. A senior member of staff at the school implemented the scheme for the first time in the 2017-18 academic year, to address the perceived educational underachievement of working-class boys between Years 7 and 9² who qualified for Pupil Premium³. Undergraduate students (hereafter ‘mentors’) from the University of Lincoln, who were studying a range of academic subjects, were recruited and trained as volunteers to be mentors for the identified boys (hereafter ‘mentees’).

The aim of the evaluation was to critically examine the student-mentoring scheme by generating and analysing information about the qualities of its main activities, characteristics, and outcomes. Despite the intervention being a pilot, the evaluation suggested that it benefitted the boys with whom it engaged, and identified areas for improvement. As lead researcher, the author conducted interviews with three mentors, and two focus groups of four and two mentees respectively, who had engaged with the scheme. A control group of two boys were also interviewed, one of whom did not engage with the scheme, and one joined the process half-way through, alongside two individual interviews with boys from Year 9. A further interview was carried out with a senior member of staff at the school.

Project Background

The educational underachievement of white, working-class boys remains a key public and policy challenge in the U.K. (Adams, 2018; House of Commons Education Committee, 2014; The Telegraph, 2015; The Guardian, 2016; The Sutton Trust, 2016). Such a challenge has been fuelled by

¹ The Undergraduate Research Opportunities Scheme (UROS) is designed to encourage undergraduate students to become actively involved in the research work at the university. It embodies the principle of “Student-as-Producer”, which underpins the University of Lincoln’s approach to teaching, learning, and student engagement (alt.lincoln.ac.uk)

² Year 7 to 9 pupils are aged between 12 and 14 years old.

³ Pupil Premium is additional funding for publicly funded schools in England (...) designed to help “disadvantaged pupils of all abilities to perform better, and close the gap between them and their peers” (GOV.UK, 2018).

anxieties about the failure of schools to effectively connect and engage with pupils, and the particular ways that working-class boys resist schooling (Ingram, 2009). Media and political explanations reflect a pervasive moral panic that places the blame for underachievement on individual boys, and constructs white boys in particular as new race victims (Gillborn, 2016). To this end, educational achievement is largely considered a problem of culture and race, overlooking wider socio-economic structures that also affect academic performance (Runnymede Trust, 2009). Despite variation and difference in emphasis in explanations, evidence suggests that this is a national scale problem in the U.K. (Equality & Human Rights Commission, 2015), and is a contemporary challenge for many secondary schools. According to The Sutton Trust (2016), only 24% of white, working-class boys achieved 5+ A* - C GCSE's in 2014, making them the lowest achieving socio-economic group⁴.

Academic research rarely examines the specificities of locality (Ingram, 2009) and localised responses in schools. Indeed, it is thought that schools currently only have a relatively small influence on the educational performances of working-class boys, compared to families. This suggests that education policies and practices might play a greater role in supporting and raising the educational aspirations of students, by becoming more focused on addressing the issues and structural barriers preventing their educational progress.

Savage (2014, cited in Wilson et al. 2018) suggests that individuals establish most of their connections within their social class. Young people from working-class backgrounds will therefore have limited access to the professional networks available to middle-class youth, restricting their understanding of professional and career progression, as well as their

⁴ The Runnymede Trust (2009: 2) suggests that 'the most disadvantaged working-class people of whatever ethnic background, roughly the poorest fifth of the population, are increasingly separated from the more prosperous majority by inequalities of income, housing and education.' It is important to acknowledge that emphasis on the 'white working-class' as another cultural minority, risks a reductionist approach that emphasises the cultural, at the expense of wider structural dimensions of inequality (Reay, 2009).

knowledge of higher education and its application processes. Furthermore, they would also be unlikely to be able to access personal tutoring during their schooling (Wilson et al. 2014, cited in Wilson et al. 2018) without the support of their teaching staff.

Mentoring enables young people to widen their networks and understanding of higher education and the professions (Wilson et al. 2018), and it is in this context that the student-mentoring scheme was established and implemented, with a key aim of promoting the educational success and aspirations of working-class boys. The majority of the boys considered to be underachieving at the school are white, although the author is cautious, and critical of reductionist, cultural explanations that limit focus entirely to ethnic background and gender. Knowledge of the subjective experiences of working-class boys and their education is a central component of the mentoring scheme and of this research.

Methodology

It was estimated by a senior member of staff at the school that 40% of its student population considered to be underachieving in their education are white, working-class boys⁵. The intervention is a mentoring scheme involving a collaborative partnership between the school and a self-selecting group of volunteer undergraduate students from the University of Lincoln. An early intention of the mentoring scheme was to utilise the Effective Lifelong Learning Inventory (ELLI) ⁶in order to generate a learning profile for each of the boys. Mentors were asked to develop profiles with the boys at the start and end of the mentoring scheme in order to measure their learning power.

The aim of the evaluation was to critically examine the first pilot of the intervention by generating and analysing information about the quality of its main activities, characteristics, and outcomes. Semi-structured interviews and

⁵ However, the research did not have access to socio-demographic data to support this.

⁶ The Effective Lifelong Learning Inventory (ELLI) is a self-assessment tool used in higher education, which facilitates awareness, reflection, and personal development planning. It is used across subject areas and levels of study to aid students in improving in seven different learning dimensions: Changing and Learning; Critical Curiosity; Meaning Making; Creativity; Learning Relationships; Strategic Awareness; Resilience.

focus groups were undertaken with key individuals involved in delivering the mentoring scheme and the boys who received it. This procedure included:

- An individual interview with a member of staff at the school, who was involved in implementing and running the project, to understand the rationale of the scheme and how it was run;
- Individual interviews with three female mentors. One was a third year Psychology, and two were second year Politics/Social Policy and Criminology students. The interviews were conducted to understand their motivations for engaging in the scheme and their experiences;
- Two focus groups with four and two boys respectively who were mentored, to understand their experiences of the scheme; their educational biographies, and their future aspirations;
- A control group interview with two students, one of whom did not take part in the mentoring scheme and another who took part half way through the process, to gain an understanding of the boys' experiences in education more generally;
- Further individual interviews with two Year 9 boys who took part in the focus groups.

The sample included 12 participants in total. It is estimated that 75% of the mentees and 60% of the mentors taking part in the student-mentoring scheme participated in its evaluation. Being a pilot, the first iteration of the student mentoring scheme was a relatively small-scale project. Currently in its second iteration, the scheme has grown in popularity and numbers, due in part to the support of the school's teaching staff who are involved in its application and development.

Throughout the mentoring process, the mentors were encouraged to write reflective diaries, which were used as part of the research dataset. These offered useful insights about the extent to which the intervention was working, or required development. It highlighted the different ways in which the mentors used their diaries and reflected on their practice. One mentor in particular, SM1, was able to capture her experience in detail, and her reflective notes gave the research team an in-depth insight into her reasons for wanting to become a mentor:

SM1: *There are a few reasons why I want to be a mentor. Firstly, I really want to be able to help and encourage someone else. I want to be able to do something meaningful and help someone improve. Secondly, I believe this experience will be very useful for me, as I want to become a clinical psychologist.*

Ethical approval was secured by the College of Social Science Ethics Committee at the University of Lincoln. Gaining ethical approval for research projects involving children under the age of 16 is often a much more rigorous process, particularly as it often involves obtaining permissions from the school's governing bodies, teachers, parents/guardians, and finally the children themselves (Castro et al. 2017). Informed consent was therefore gained from all participants, as well as from the parents of the boys, all of whom were under the age of 16. Participants and their guardians were informed about the intentions of the research via a participant information sheet. All participants were informed that they were free to withdraw from the research at any point, that the interviews would be audio-recorded, that the data would be stored, and that all details would be anonymised in written outputs about the research outcomes. Participants are hereafter referred to as SM1-2-3 for the student mentors, and M1-8 for the mentees. To ensure anonymity, all contextual information has been replaced to avoid identification.

Following data generation, the research team worked collaboratively to generate and develop themes across the dataset, which included transcripts from the semi-structured interviews, and from the focus groups and mentor diaries. These themes structure the analyses and provide rich, in-depth and contextualised insights about the mentoring scheme and the extent of its value for those involved.

Findings

The mentoring scheme emerged in response to research that identified white-working class boys as being most in danger of underachieving in secondary education (Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2015), the wider political debate that ensued (Hansard, 2016), and the professional

practice of educators based in a secondary school in Lincoln. One of these educators, a senior member of staff responsible for initiating the mentoring scheme, commented that they had seen working-class boys engaging with education in a superficial and ritualistic way that meant that many of them did not fulfil their potential:

I found over the years this ritualistic approach to education, whereby students come along, and they do it, but they don't engage in the process very well. It just becomes a routine they go through [...] they don't fulfil their potential to achieve and they just kind of float through.

Volunteer student mentors were recruited via advertising at the University of Lincoln Student Union in mid-October 2017, three weeks after the start of the university term. This aligned with the readiness of the school to run the first training mentoring session for the first time. The advertisement stated that volunteers needed to demonstrate an interest in life-long learning and a mature attitude to the challenges facing boys within education and the wider community. Volunteers were also informed that they would gain essential skills in working with young people from a range of backgrounds. The mentors felt that the advert was interesting and it appealed to their own interests, but suggested that it could have included more detail about how the scheme would work:

SM1: *It talked about mentoring students, but it wasn't very detailed, I wasn't exactly sure what it would entail, seemed really interesting anyway...*

The advert was successful in attracting an initial group of eight student mentors studying a range of subjects. These were invited by the senior member of staff to attend a training programme at the school at the end of November, 2017. A total of eleven volunteers attended the training because some students signed up at a later date. The mentors suggested that recruitment should be time limited, and that training should be delivered to the entire group on specific dates to prevent them starting on different dates. SM2 explained:

SM2:*The school allowed more mentors to join, but this has meant that students now have a new mentor, rather than their original one.*

Future iterations of the scheme should therefore be advertised at the start of the academic term, and in a more proactive fashion, using a variety of different platforms.

The mentors underwent a period of training before the project started that provided an introduction to mentoring, including participating in roleplay to support the mentors in their new roles. The mentors were also provided with training around safeguarding issues, key school policies and procedures, and the ELLI profiles used by the school so that they could support mentees and become familiar with the school's working practices:

SM2:*They spoke to us about safeguarding issues, reasons for disadvantaged, working class children, why they might struggle with education, and then also we got a sheet and presentation on ELLI profiles, which was used as a way to measure the strengths and weaknesses of their learning...*

In general, the training was well received, and the mentors felt supported throughout; however, mentors commented that they would have benefitted from a toolbox of activities that they could use to help them to work with the mentees so that they could address a range of behavioural, social, and academic skills. Moreover, the mentors thought clearer guidance on what should be covered in the mentoring sessions would have helped make the scheme more effective:

SM3:*They could have organised it more in terms of giving us goals or telling us things to say or mention, because then students (mentees) would have got the same kind of mentoring.*

Mentors also highlighted the importance of keeping mentors and mentees paired once they had developed a relationship. In some instances, mentors and mentees were reallocated and this meant they had to build a rapport with a different person, which took time and in some cases had a negative impact on the scheme:

SM2: *There was a point where more mentors started the scheme, which meant that instead of having two boys I then had one. [...] it was all about building a relationship with them so that the boy I had done the reports with, done the homework plans, I felt like I had started to build a relationship and kind of to get somewhere, but I was then no longer mentoring him. We were both going to have to start from the beginning with someone else.*

It is also important to highlight that, being an experimental pilot project, the student-mentoring scheme was still in its developmental stage, and as such, an ongoing process of *'actively trying to find out what worked and what didn't'* (senior staff member) was taking place throughout its provision. The focus groups with the boys provided some insights into some of the challenges they were experiencing with regard to their education. Some of the boys acknowledged that they were misbehaving or acting up to perceptions that fellow peers had of them. They explained that this was a result of being bored, feeling unsupported by some teaching staff who were strict or authoritarian in their approach, and not understanding the real-world value of education later in life.

M5: *The one thing I don't like is one of the lessons, [...] one lesson I really hate, [subject].*

EG: *alright, do you want to tell me why you hate it?*

M5: *'cause it's a little bit boring.*

It is important that the mentoring sessions offer something different because some suggested that they could be more fun or structured around activities:

M4: *I expected it to be like, good, did a lot of stuff, but it just got repetitive, boring, and felt a bit useless.*

EG: *Ok, and what do you guys think could be done to make it less boring and useless. What do you think?*

M1: *more advice*

M2: *from the mentors about what we should do if we don't like a certain lesson, then we can just get told what to do, that would improve it*

M1: *Yes, more advice, definitely!*

In this context, reactions to the scheme overall were mixed. Some of the boys felt that they had been coping well in their education anyway, while others, when prompted, said that they had received the mentoring scheme positively, even though it did not necessarily meet their expectations. To some extent, this may be linked to the ways in which mentees were selected by the senior

staff member who designed the scheme. The boys did not opt in to the scheme but were chosen.

In the focus groups, the boys suggested that the mentors were more approachable than teaching staff and that they offered a safe space to talk through and reflect on their overall educational experiences. They also appreciated the anonymity of speaking to the mentors and felt it was a safe space to discuss their views of teachers, and if they had had a bad day. This highlights that the mentoring scheme has scope to offer more than study skills, extending to the affective or emotional elements of education too. SM1 explained in her reflective diary:

***SM1:**My aim is to make them look forward to these sessions; hopefully I achieved that. I was told I may be too soft, but all I wanted to do was create a safe environment. I wanted to be someone they can talk to without being judged or told off.*

Initially, some of the boys who were mentored suggested that they already felt confident in their subjects, however, they hoped that the scheme would change their perspective of school and learning and help them to address issues with subjects they did not like or for which they lacked motivation. Several identified a need for a set of skills and techniques that would help them to improve in the subjects they were struggling with, something that the mentors felt unable to provide:

***SM2:**The aim of the mentoring scheme was to improve student's behavioural, social and academic skills; however, how to do this was not very clear, which made it difficult to know what the focus of each mentoring session should be.*

The scheme did offer the mentors some important insights into some of the issues the boys were facing. One of the mentors for example argued that:

***SM3:**There is a perception that some children don't do work because they can't be bothered, but then I found that some of them lose concentration because they are not taught the way they need to be taught.*

As highlighted previously, reactions to the mentoring scheme were mixed among the boys, perhaps linked to the varying and sometimes inconsistent ways in which the student mentors approached the scheme. SM2 had a clear understanding of school policies and of what the mentoring scheme was trying to achieve, which was to inspire students from working-class

backgrounds to be more involved in their education. Some of the mentors were less clear about what support was already in place at the school to support the students. Mentors wanted to know this information in advance of the mentoring session to be able to signpost students should they have a specific problem that needed to be addressed. They also suggested that the scheme would be more beneficial to students in Years 7 and 8, as one of the students was in Year 9 and they felt he did not benefit from the scheme as much:

..., ... I think they need to [...] adapt the scheme a bit more to suit the year group, rather than it just being generalised.

Nevertheless, one of the boys from Year 9 who took part in the individual interviews explained that:

...It's [the mentoring scheme] that's given me a clear picture of what is out there, things I can do after school and all that...

He also explained that his mentor had had an impact with regard to his behaviour in class, helping him think about how it might affect other students and the teachers:

...I think it did help a little bit - just get on with your lesson, try not to cause a hassle, it is just distracting for everyone else.

This highlights that more regular reflection of the scheme is needed throughout its implementation, so that adjustments can be made if needed, but also to reassure mentors that they are having a positive impact on the students with whom they are engaging.

To improve effectiveness, mentors also felt that more guidance on structuring the sessions for the students would help, including more information for the boys about why they were encouraged to take part in the scheme. In its first iteration, the mentors felt that there was no clear objective for each session. SM3 suggested that *'every mentoring session needs to have a different aim and outcome.'*

This view was supported by the boys, who stated a preference for interaction and activities as opposed to discussions about lessons. The boys responded well when mentors engaged them in different, subject-relevant activities. Some of the mentors thought "on their feet" and the boys described

activities that were examples of good practice, including support for writing a theatre script and a story on the computer. An early decision by the senior staff member was to encourage the mentors to use the ELLI profiles with the mentees in order to tailor sessions and measure outcomes via change in learning profiles. The mentors did not consider these to be a reliable way to assess the students' strengths and weaknesses.

***SM2:**It was difficult to explain to the students what the different dimensions of learning meant, and it appeared that they did not really understand what the ELLI profiles were. It is possible the ELLI profiles were not reliable at measuring the strengths and weaknesses of learning because they are only based on a questionnaire, therefore the results can be influenced by personal interpretation of the questions.*

More in-depth training on how to best use the ELLI profiles and how to implement them within the mentoring would be beneficial to both mentors and mentees. It would help the boys to interpret the questionnaires better, and it would assist the mentors in supporting them through improving their learning dimensions.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Within the scope and timescale of this research, it has not been possible to assess whether the mentoring scheme has had any quantifiable benefits or impacts on the educational achievement of the boys who took part. Nevertheless, the qualitative research findings do suggest that the intervention had some value for the boys, including providing a safe, independent space for them to reflect on their educational experiences; to explore some of the challenges they face, and to consider possible solutions. In its first iteration, the scheme had some issues which might be addressed via the following recommendations:

1. In order to attract student mentors, the volunteering role needs to be advertised more widely at the University earlier in the academic year. The scheme might be advertised in the first week of term, at the beginning of academic lectures, and via an email to all students. It might also be recognised as part of the University's employability framework, the Lincoln Award,⁷ and promoted by the Careers and Employability Department.
2. To ensure consistency in the approach to the mentor training, this should be delivered to the entire group of volunteers on specific dates. It should be made clear on the advertisement for the role that students are required and expected to attend on specified dates in order to receive their training.
3. Although the training was very comprehensive, mentors would benefit from more guidance about how to support the boys with behavioural, social, and academic skills and what the school can offer in terms of holistic support.
4. The mentors felt compelled to adopt a mentoring style that reflected a tutoring relationship, focused predominantly on study skills. While important, existing research suggests that mentoring is likely to be more effective if it incorporates study skills *and* engagement with mentees on a personal level (Eby et al. 2008). Mentoring thereby offers a safe space for boys to share information about their hobbies and wider interests beyond school, as well as their specific concerns about education.
5. The training offered to mentors is already clear about safeguarding and boundaries, but mentors would benefit from understanding the degree of flexibility they have for discussing the more personal aspects of the boys' lives. A set of guidelines might be developed that identified "safe" and "unsafe" topics for mentors, as well as a clear set of aims and objectives for each session, tailored to the boys' year of study. The provision of an adaptable structure and evaluation for each mentoring

⁷ The Lincoln Award is an employability framework designed to support, enhance, and recognise extracurricular activity: <http://uolcareers.co.uk/students-graduates/lincoln-award/>

session has the potential to help the mentors to build confidence, and ensure focus on the mentoring relationship.

6. As a final recommendation, the author would like to highlight that not all students who underachieve are male and that girls might also benefit from the student-mentoring scheme. The concept of educational underachievement has almost exclusively been associated with boys, 'to the extent that the idea of a girl who underachieves seems virtually inconceivable' (Jones, 2005: 269), but while focusing on boys, research may have failed to identify the needs of girls who have so far been overlooked.

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