

# Raising educational aspirations? Evaluating the second iteration of a student-mentoring scheme

## Project Background:

The educational underachievement of working-class boys has been a key focus of public and policy anxiety in recent years and is recognised as an important contemporary challenge for schools (Rolfe, 2015). This is a national problem whereby, white working-class boys have been identified as a population that statistically is most in danger of educational underachievement (Equality & Human Rights Commission, 2015). Existing research suggests that schools have a relatively small influence on the educational performance of white working-class boys compared to parents and family members (Burgess, 2014), suggesting 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.

It is in this context that the student-mentoring scheme was established and implemented in the 2017-2018 academic year, with the key aim of promoting the educational aspirations of working-class boys in the locality. Currently in its second iteration, the scheme saw students from the University of Lincoln acting as volunteer mentors for the identified boys. Mentoring enables young people to widen their networks and understanding of higher education and the professions (Wilson *et al.*, 2018), and thus, have the potential to widen their social and cultural capital.

In the summer of 2019 a team of researchers from the School of Social and Political Sciences at the University of Lincoln, funded under the Undergraduate Research Opportunity Scheme (UROS), undertook the continued evaluation of the student-mentoring scheme with the aim to establish whether the findings and recommendations of the first evaluation had been successfully implemented, but also to identify areas for improvement.



## Methodology:

The aim of the continued evaluation of the student-mentoring scheme was to critically examine the second iteration of the intervention by generating and analysing information about the quality of its main activities, characteristics and outcomes. Semi-structured interviews and focus groups were undertaken with key individuals involved in delivering the mentoring scheme and the boys it was delivered to. This included:

- Three individual interviews with teaching staff at the school, and one focus group comprising of two teachers who were involved in implementing and running the project, to understand the rationale of the scheme and how it was run;
- Individual interviews with four mentors, to understand their motivations for engaging in the scheme and their experiences;
- Two focus groups of ten and six boys who were mentored, to understand their experiences of the scheme, their educational biographies and their future aspirations;
- A further individual interview with one year 10 boy who took part in the focus groups.

Ethical approval was secured by the College of Social Science Ethics Committee at the University of Lincoln. 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.

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 focus groups and mentor reflective 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:

After full analysis of the findings by the research team, it became apparent that the student-mentoring scheme had been fundamentally changed during its second iteration, and that only a few recommendations had been implemented. Nevertheless, it was clear that the scheme had benefitted the boys who had taken part and had been well received by the teachers and school in general. It had also given the mentors an opportunity to gain new skills which will support their future careers and a chance to share their knowledge and experience with their respective mentees.

- It was highlighted by the mentors taking part in the evaluation that despite the scheme being advertised on the Student Union website, it was still not easily accessible by all students. It was suggested that the best way for the student-mentoring scheme to be advertised would be during lectures and via email.
- It was also found that, although training had been very comprehensive for some mentors, it had not been the same across the board, highlighting that further improvement could be made in this area. It was also found that some of the teachers who supported the mentoring scheme during its second iteration had very little input with regards to the mentors training and wished they could be more involved from the start.
- The mentors were made to adopt a mentoring style that reflected a “coaching” relationship with all participants referring to the mentors as Teaching Assistants during the interview process. While beneficial, mentoring should also offer the boys a safe place to talk about the structural barriers that may be affecting their ability to engage in education, as well as an opportunity for the mentors to share their experience of higher education and their future ambitions.
- All of the boys taking part in the evaluation explained they had not been told they were going to be working with a mentor, a fact that was also highlighted during the mentor interviews. The boys wished they had been spoken to about the opportunity to work with a mentor and given a choice of subject. One of the boys explained he was mentored in “one of the subjects I thought I was excelling in, considering I was only getting high grades”.
- Nevertheless, the scheme was well received by the boys with one of them explaining “my mentor was nice, he gave me the confidence to work harder” and another saying that his mentor had helped him get “second best in the class test results”. They all agreed that they were happy they had taken part in the scheme and would recommend it to their fellow students because they saw the value of it.
- The boys also explained that they felt more comfortable talking to the mentors rather than the teachers at times, suggesting that they would welcome the opportunity to talk to their mentors about other topics beyond school. It was suggested by the boys and the teachers themselves that a mixed approach which saw coaching in class and mentoring outside of class would be more beneficial in achieving the project’s aims and objectives. One of the teachers explained “if the aim is to support them to appreciate education more, that kind of conversation cannot happen in a lesson time [...] if they came in and took them out for 15 minutes or half an hour, that would have more of an impact in terms of their aspirations, their views of education. I think that is what I would change”.

The above finding suggest that the mentoring scheme had some value for the boys, providing them with support and guidance during their lessons and helping them achieve better results in their subjects. They also suggest that it was well received by the teachers who supported the scheme, but that a better understanding of the project’s aims and objectives, and more involvement from the start, would give them the opportunity to better adapt it to their individual subjects and teaching style. Giving the boys the chance to discuss their involvement in the scheme and which subjects to be mentored in, would give them greater input into the forms of support embarked upon for their educational needs.



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