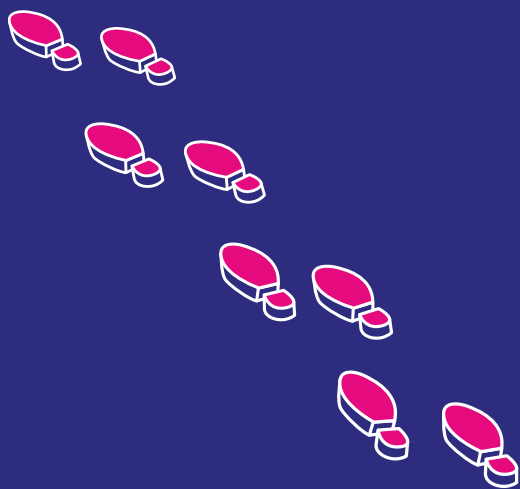




White Boys from Working Class Backgrounds: Practitioner Toolkit



Background

Go Higher West Yorkshire commissioned Cosmos Engagement Ltd to complete a research investigation into the experiences and challenges of white boys from working class backgrounds in West Yorkshire, to identify any areas for support they may have and how these may be addressed.

We spoke to 18 white Boys (6 KS4, 12 FE) from Working-Class Backgrounds (POLAR4 Quintiles 1-2) via a number of online interviews and discussion groups.

We also held stakeholder interviews with 6 Stakeholders from 1 Secondary School and 1 FE College in West Yorkshire with a high proportion of White Working-Class Learners.



Key Insights Participants

Experiences of Education

Boys we spoke to generally had **mostly positive views and experiences of education**.

Boys generally expressed a **practical perspective about the importance of education** and the benefit of further study relative to employment

Friends and social aspects were most commonly cited as among the most positive aspects of school or college life, followed by enjoyment of **subjects of interest**. However, **fellow students could also be a negative or challenging aspect of education**.

As with education in general, boys described **mostly positive experiences with teachers**, while acknowledging that they got on better with some teachers than others. Boys generally suggested that their **teachers were supportive** and indeed **many reported positive examples of direct support from teachers**.

There was a consistent theme, mentioned by the majority of FE students, that **“college is better than school”**.

Boys we spoke to generally expressed **positive future intentions**. **Over half of FE students planned to go to university**.

Interests and Perceptions of University

Boys we spoke to expressed a **wide range of subject interests**. Sport, business and science were the most commonly cited, but there were also some that studied, what they felt were perceived as less “typically male” subjects including art and drama.

Boys we spoke to expressed mostly **positive perceptions of university**. **“Education” and degree/qualifications** were the most commonly cited benefit of university.

Financial cost/debt were by far the most commonly cited as a challenging or negative aspect, followed by the **stress of studying**.

The White Working-Class Label

Most of the boys we spoke to expressed **some understanding of and identification with the working-class label**, although their descriptions of what this meant and confidence with which they stated their identification with this label varied.

Influences and Future Support

Boys generally described a **positive influence and interest from parents** around their education.

Teachers of boys' preferred subjects were the most common source of advice and support around future options

From the boys' perspective, resources including textbooks, computers and subject-specific equipment were the most commonly cited challenge facing working-class children in education.

Lack of "**connections**" were also among the most common barriers cited for working-class children

Mental health was mentioned by a number of students as something they feel themselves, or boys in general may be more likely to struggle with.



Key Insights Stakeholders

Stakeholders' perspectives around the experiences and attitudes of white boys from working-class backgrounds were quite different to those of the boys that we spoke to, suggesting that there is greater segmentation within this demographic, with sub-groups much more clearly defined by certain characteristics, attitudes and behaviours.

While the boys we spoke to in our learner discussions were generally relatively well engaged with education, stakeholders suggested that this was not typically the case with many white boys from working-class backgrounds, from their perspective. **Stakeholders suggested that many boys are disengaged, as evidenced by poor attendance and behaviour**

It was suggested that boys from working-class backgrounds are **typically expected to work as soon as possible and earn money**, and that further study was often seen to detract from that goal. Stakeholders suggested that most boys tended to pursue what may be seen as **typically "masculine" subjects – mostly practical subjects***

When discussing boys' perceptions of university, **financial cost/debt** was again cited as **the most common barrier**. While many of the boys we spoke to still intended to go to university in spite of this challenge, stakeholders suggested that this was too big a barrier for the majority of white boys from working-class backgrounds, and that **university was simply seen as "not worth it"**.

**Stakeholder views on subject choice, masculinity and identity are all reflected in an extensive literature review that was conducted as part of this research project. Further details can be found in the full research report.*



How To Use The Toolkit

The Toolkit contains guidance and considerations for practitioners when engaging with white boys from working-class backgrounds, based on key insights and recommendations from our discussions with those learners.

The Toolkit highlights some of the key concerns, questions and priorities for white boys from working-class backgrounds, as well as considerations and recommendations for practitioners pre, during and post-engagement.

The Toolkit does not imply that boys from working-class backgrounds all have the same needs. All individual learners are unique and should always be treated as such. However, these recommendations are based on common educational experiences, social factors, priorities and concerns described by learners from a working class background.

The Toolkit **does not** specify a limited focus of support for any white male. It also **does not** ask that practitioners fundamentally alter the content being delivered. It simply highlights elements of support or content that may require increased focus, in order to better provide the support that learners are likely to need.



Do...

- Use the Toolkit to better understand the common challenges, concerns and priorities for learners from working-class backgrounds
- Refer to the Toolkit before an engagement as a prompt to increase the focus on key questions for your audience
- Refer to the Toolkit after an engagement to help guide any follow-up actions or check-ins with students
- Treat learners as individuals and tailor your support as far as possible



Please do not...

- Assume that learners from working-class backgrounds have the exact same challenges or needs
- Fundamentally change or omit elements of your content or delivery. Learners from working-class backgrounds are likely to need much of the same information or support (e.g. around university options, student finance, accommodation etc) – these are simply likely to be more or less of a priority for different groups.



It is hoped that by using the recommendations within this Toolkit, practitioners will be better equipped to provide the support that is often needed among learners from working-class backgrounds, to support them with their progression.

White Boys from Working-Class Backgrounds



KEY CONCERNS & QUESTIONS

learners might have:

Where are all the students from my background?

I sometimes **view myself as a failure in education**, I don't feel I can do it...

I am **likely to not know what I want to do in the future** as it's not something I think about

How can I get ahead when I **don't know anyone** who can **give me a job**?

I understand the **value of education**, but I **don't always enjoy it**, education is a **stepping-stone** to get me where I want to be

I am likely to be **interested in the subjects that I really enjoy**

I sometimes feel **teachers put excessive pressure on me**, how do I manage this... what can I do to **manage academic pressure**?

I am likely to **feel pressure to do what others tell me to do**, I'm **not always confident going against this** and saying no. I feel I can't be different or be myself.

I am likely to **worry about student finance and getting into debt**

CONSIDERATIONS

Prior to event:

- Can you **start to build rapport and manage student expectations** before the event?:
 - ➔ Can you send them **information about the workshop / session**? To show them you have come to the session with a balanced approach of what they can achieve
 - ➔ Can you **send them a bio. of you / who you are**? So they are more likely to be relaxed when you / they arrive to start the session
 - ➔ **Provide a clear explanation of why they are there** ahead of / start of session **What's the point of this?... or Why you are here?...** this will help to build trust and buy in with the boys ahead of the session / event
- **Teachers may have already formed ideas** about what I can achieve but **I'm more capable than they might think**
 - ➔ I am **likely to have experienced some stereotyping / labelling** - come to the session with a balanced approach about what this group can achieve
 - ➔ The key consideration with this group is **often not capability**, it's usually trying to achieve high **engagement, motivation or ensuring learners understand the relevance of the activity**
- **Less likely to seek progression support** from careers staff and teachers **if they don't enjoy the subject**, depending instead on **advice from teachers where subject enjoyment is high**

WAYS TO ENGAGE

Activities, content & message:



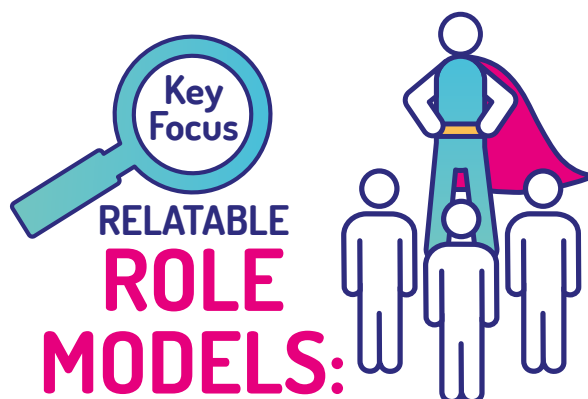
- **Practical activity** is high on their priority and **key to engaging** with this group
 - Boys are **driven by their interest / enjoyment of their subject** – can you target your activity to those who already have an interest in the subject, or get an idea of subject preference before the event?
 - **Lead activity / messages with value** – what is the value of the session for them, how **does it relate to their interests** and potential **future goals** and aspirations
 - **Always ask yourself why?** Why would this group **engage** in your session, **what's in it for them?** Look at it **from the learners' perspective**
 - They're **only interested in the subjects they really enjoy** – as a practitioner this creates a **really useful hook to open up the conversation about HE...** with HE... with HE you get to choose a course you enjoy and study it for a prolonged period of time
 - **Boys are likely prefer informal relationship with teachers** – as a practitioner this creates an **opportunity to engage** with this group
- ➔ You may **play a different role to teaching staff**, one which means although you're not a friend, **you can begin with less formal discussion to help build engagement**
- **Boys need support to develop their mindset** to succeed, to **deal with academic pressure** and **not feel like a failure** for getting it wrong – activity focused on the **process of achievement**; showing learners **their progress whilst celebrating their success** will help support this aspect

CELEBRATING SUCCESS:



- **Getting learners to reflect on themselves, their achievements and the positive aspects** of what they are achieving, would be useful for this group.

This can be incorporated into activity which focuses on progress, reflecting on this and highlighting success to them, however small



This is a key priority area for this group, they often don't identify or meet people like them from a working-class background who have achieved academically, progressed to HE and / or working in professional careers.

1. Where do these students see **'people like them'** when they work with you?
2. Do you have **staff or student ambassadors** who fit this **profile** and can work with young people?
3. Do you have **staff** in the **wider organisation** (support or lecturing staff) who can **deliver a relevant session / workshop?**

AREAS OF PRIORITY SUPPORT

for this group:



- **Future Focus** – young men from this background are **likely to not have a firm plan of what they want to do in the future** as it's not something they think about
- **How to build connections for future, employment & career** – this group often feel they have less connections than wealthier children & therefore only have qualifications to rely on
- They would benefit from specific **guidance around employment, time spent meeting employers and pathways to future careers**, with a clear **understanding of the competitive nature of work, career and apprenticeship routes**
- **Student Finance** – learners would benefit from this area being covered in depth so there is **greater understanding of what finance and debt are**.
 - This group is likely to be put off by 'loans', 'debt' as they are more likely to live in households with low incomes
 - Their view of finance is often based on limited knowledge, where all debt is perceived to be bad
 - Look at their return on their investment in higher education
 - What their earning potential is likely to be
 - What's the true meaning of debt in the context of Student Finance
- Getting learners to **understand what 'academic pressure' is and how to manage it**, will help at key crucial points of the year (academic pinch points)
- **This group values education as a stepping-stone** to their future. It's worth **reminding them WHY they're there** and supporting them to **remain focussed on the future**
 - This group can often work in a short-term way and struggle to really look at their long-term future plans
- **Early intervention** before students become **set on subjects can be beneficial** – showcase a **wider range of subjects** within your delivery inc. **traditional and non-traditional subjects & careers**
 - This group is likely to be interested in subjects they enjoy and **less likely to engage** in workshops or conversations that **don't relate to them** or that they don't find interesting
 - Helping learners make **informed decisions and presenting a range** of courses and careers **is hugely important** – with this group **early intervention is key** as they are **less set on the idea of course, job and career at this point**
- Focus on areas that deal with **academic pressure** and **how to manage the stress of studying**
- **Mindset, motivation and self-belief are key longer term development areas for this group**
- They feel others have **low expectations for them**, they **need support to build their confidence** & support in helping them **to achieve success**
- **Mental Health is also a key priority area for this group** – even more important as they are less likely to speak out about it and ask for help. They are also likely to be experiencing difficulties at home and can sometimes be socially discouraged from expressing their emotions



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