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An Approach to tackling 'Laddish' Masculinity to raise Boys' Achievement at Secondary School

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This paper is presented as part of a symposium concerned with preliminary findings from the main intervention stage of a four year DfES funded project 'Raising Boys' Achievement'.² During the pilot stage of the project a classification framework for the approaches schools were taking to tackle the issue of boys' achievement was formulated. Approaches might be described as organisational, individual, pedagogic or socio-cultural. This paper focuses on the latter category. 'Socio-cultural' in the context it is used in this project is defined and links to the literature concerning masculinities are made. The socio-cultural approach that has been successfully developed in one school is outlined and a specific innovative strategy that is a crucial component of this approach, 'the key leader scheme' is discussed in detail. Issues arising from attempting to transfer this 'originator' school's approach to partner schools sharing similar socio-economic contexts are highlighted and necessary preconditions for implementation of the key leader strategy are identified.

Introduction

'Boys' GCSE failures spark new 'lads' row' (The Guardian, 22 August 2002)

Boys' achievement continues to be a national concern in the media (Smithers & Ward, 2004). 'Laddish culture' has been implicated as the cause of boys' 'failure' relative to girls, as the headline above suggests. David Hart, general secretary of the National Association of Head Teachers, is quoted in this article as saying: 'there are no quick fix solutions to the problems caused by the anti-learning laddish culture. But solutions will have to be found if the performance targets are to be met by the next election.' The government also seems worried about 'laddish culture' as a DfES spokesperson notes in the same article 'Many boys may think it is 'uncool' to be seen to be working hard'. This

article is typical of those that tend to appear when performance data is made public. Clearly the phenomenon of ‘laddish culture’ is a major concern.

I contend that ‘laddishness’ is a construction of masculinity commonly adopted by boys attending the group of schools forming the focus of this paper. The values held by such boys are contrary to those upheld by the education system and those that are a precursor for academic success. However the ‘socio-cultural’ approach to tackling boys’ achievement that has been developed over the past decade in one of the ‘originator’ (lead) schools that has worked with the *Raising Boys’ Achievement Project* indicates that it is possible to work with these boys so that academic success is achieved through a recognition and reframing process. Particular strategies that have implemented are outlined and a specific innovative strategy that is a crucial component of this approach, ‘the Key Leader Scheme’ is discussed in detail. Data is presented indicating the degree of success the school has enjoyed since engaging this approach.

The school is now working with a group of local schools facing similar socio-economic circumstances in the main intervention stage of the research to share their socio-cultural approach to raising boys’ achievement. In practical terms this means that the partner schools in the ‘triad’ or group of schools have adopted a number of originator school’s strategies, including the Key Leader Scheme and adapted these to their own contexts. Although performance data is not yet available to measure the how successfully these strategies work in other contexts, preliminary evidence from interviews conducted with staff and students in these partner schools suggest these strategies are transferable but only if certain preconditions are met. These are discussed further below. Now that these preconditions are beginning to be explored and put in place in the partner schools it appears that the transformative potential of the approach is starting to be realised.

Socio-cultural Approaches

An analysis of the strategies used by schools involved in the pilot stage of the *Raising Boys’ Achievement Project* (2000 – 2001) and a survey of the literature identified four distinct approaches to tackling boys’ achievement: organisational (whole school level), individual, pedagogic, and socio-cultural. We define socio-cultural approaches as:

Attempts which try and change images of laddish masculinity held by the peer group / family, and to develop an ethos which helps to eradicate ‘it’s not cool to learn’ feelings, so diminishing the importance of anti-work groups by marginalizing them or incorporating them within the mainstream.

Thus the key feature of socio-cultural approaches is that they tackle laddish masculinity. As alluded to above, in common parlance laddish masculinity is seen by many as one of, if not the major reason why boys’ academic performance is poorer than that of girls. But what is meant by laddish masculinity and how does this link to theories of gender identity?

Masculinities and Schooling

Although concerns about the schooling of boys may date back to 1693 when the English philosopher John Locke expressed concern about how schools were failing to develop writing and speaking skills in young gentlemen (Cohen, 1998), theorising about masculinity/masculinities and actually using this knowledge to inform practice is a relatively recent phenomenon (Francis, 2000; Skelton, 2001).

Feminist researchers considering the plight of girls in schools in the 1970s and 1980s, drew heavily on sex-role theories of gender identity whose central tenet is that children are socialized into a restricted role appropriate for their sex. As a result a number of initiatives attempted to change girls' perceptions of themselves (such as Women into Science and Engineering, Girls into Science and Technology and so forth). It was not apparent however how the notion of a restricted sex-role would disadvantage boys, the privileged sex (Connell, 1989). Thus it appeared that this way of theorising gender was not particularly relevant when considering masculinity. Furthermore sex-role theories suggest that children are passive recipients of sex-appropriate knowledge and a number of studies began to show this was not the case (see for instance Connell, 1989; Riddell, 1989). Such approaches also treat girls and boys as being homogeneous categories. These criticisms coupled with the influence of post-structuralism in the social sciences began a rethinking of how masculinity is constructed by boys in the early 1990s. This movement was given added momentum by the discourse of a 'crisis in masculinity' resulting from a combination of the advent of publication of league tables of GCSE results in 1992, educational reform under Conservative and more recently Labour administrations and a concern about the changing role of men and women in society (Arnot, David, & Weiner, 1999). Salisbury and Jackson (1996) summarise the key themes of current theories as follows (note this is a paraphrase of their points):

1. There is no such thing as masculinity – only masculinities. Masculinity is never unified or homogeneous.
2. Masculine identities are always full of cracks and fissures, as they shift across history and different cultures. They are complex and contradictory; they are never harmoniously integrated or rationally coherent.
3. Masculine identity is always fragmentary and multi-faceted. Every male is made up of multiple masculine identities struggling for dominance.
4. There is an internal pecking order between these varied forms of masculinity. There is always an internal conflict between different interests of ruling masculinities and more marginalized masculinities, for instance gay, disabled, asthmatic, effeminate/heterosexual boys and some black boys.

Thus as Salisbury and Jackson comment there is variety, difference and plurality between and within individuals, and identity is contradictory and fragmentary. Identity is seen as positioned and repositioned through discourses and power is associated with this process. Although some commentators are beginning to question the usefulness of post-

structuralist theories of masculinity (Francis, 2000), this theoretical perspective informs the analysis presented in this paper.

Different forms of masculinity were evident in the literature as long ago as 1977 when Willis described the 'lads' and the 'ear'oles' (Willis, 1977) however Mac an Ghail (1994) was one of the early studies to offer an explanation in terms of current theories. He describes three groups of working-class heterosexual males: the Macho Lads, the Academic Achievers and the New Enterprisers, as well as the middle-class group of Real Englishmen he encountered in one predominantly working-class school. Macho Lads are described as those who view school as a system of hostile authority and meaningless work demands. Macho Lads engage in 'looking after your mates', 'acting tough', 'having a laugh', 'looking smart' (in a street wise sense) and 'having a good time'. They reject the official three Rs of reading, writing and arithmetic, and the unofficial three Rs of rules, routines and regulations, and instead get status from the three Fs – fighting, fucking and football. Academic Achievers, described as reminiscent of grammar school scholarship boys, see academic qualifications as their ticket out of the working classes and envisage a professional career. To achieve this they adopt a strong work ethic. Although positive towards the academic curriculum, they are not entirely pro-school and are critical of some teacher practices. Other teachers and students often position Academic Achievers as effeminate and they are ridiculed for their work ethic, hence they don't feel comfortable with middle-class students or some other working-class boys (for instance the Macho Lads). New Enterprisers formed a third group of working-class boys, who see and utilise the new vocational routes opening up in school. These students value rationality, instrumentalism, forward planning and careerism.

Connell (1989) proposes a similar typology (Cool Guys, Swots and Wimps) based on interviews with young working-class men who had recently left school. Categories of masculinity however do differ with social class (Arnot et al., 1999) and ethnicity (Sewell, 1997) because masculinities are constructed in a given context in relation to general social, cultural and institutional patterns of power (Skelton, 2001). Thus Mac an Ghail's analysis is of particular use as the schools presented in this paper serve working-class communities. The local context of these schools is one of high levels of unemployment following the collapse of the local manufacturing industry. These working-class boys cannot therefore rely on future work for status/power, thus they have to look to other avenues. For those who see little point in striving towards qualifications 'the authority structure of the school becomes the antagonist against which one's masculinity is cut' (Connell, 1989) and hence these boys are likely to adopt forms of masculinity similar to that of Mac an Ghail's Macho Lads. This is the laddish culture referred in our definition of socio-cultural approaches. As outlined by Mac an Ghail these boys reject values that are conducive to academic success such as conformity, work ethic etc. and indeed devalue academic success instead deriving status from the admiration of peers when they challenge the school's authority. Other boys will use the school as a means to getting out by adopting other forms of masculinity such as the Academic Achievers and New Enterprisers described above.

Institutional practices such as discipline and authority, the pastoral system, the curriculum, teaching styles and school values, school culture and ethos, and competition (Salisbury & Jackson, 1996) all contribute to the forms of masculinity that are constructed by boys attending a particular school. For instance Salisbury and Jackson describe the ethos at Etches School as being defined by a hard disciplinary approach linked with competitive, individualised self-sufficiency. In these circumstances boys see these values as what is needed to get on and therefore don't respond positively to a collaborative learning environment. The part played by male teachers within this as perpetrating laddish culture through hard-line discipline and authority regimes is particularly important (Jackson, 2002; Salisbury & Jackson, 1996). As Salisbury and Jackson comment it is somewhat ironic that boys will challenge such regimes, which seek to control them as the boys are trying to competitively succeed within the same framework! In addition setting and streaming which make success and failure more apparent are also important (Arnot et al., 1999). As has already been mentioned peer group cultures are important in the process of constructing masculinity in schools as these provide mechanisms through which masculinities (and femininities) are developed and lived out (Skelton, 2001). Francis (2000) examines their operation within the classroom and discusses the gendered nature of classroom culture in relation to physical and verbal domination, overt heterosexuality and sexism, homophobia and misogyny, verbal and physical aggression, gendered pastimes and subjects of talk and gendered responses to specific stimuli.

Families are also important in the construction of masculinity. Working-class people can feel 'injured, insulted and disempowered' by their experience of school (Connell, Ashenden, Kessler, & Dowsett, 1982), thus not surprisingly they may not be terribly supportive of schools as far as their son's education is concerned. This may encourage the construction of a laddish masculinity. Thus societal influences through the labour market, families and peers, as well as the specific institutional practices all contribute to the constructions of masculinity within a given school situation.

As discussed above current theories of masculinity conceptualise masculinities as competing with each other such that there is a dominant or hegemonic masculinity, with others being subjugated or marginalized (Connell, 1995). Connell defines the hegemonic masculinity is that which is 'culturally exalted' at a given point but this is not fixed and has to be constantly reinforced through dominating other masculinities. Hegemonic masculinity is determined by collective cultural and institutional practices. Within a school serving a working-class community given the above discussion it seems most likely that the hegemonic masculinity will be that of Macho Lads or the laddish culture that has caught the attention of the national media and government. It is interesting that the media is blaming this manifestation of masculinity for the failing of boys generally as it is by no means clear that such a masculinity would be dominant in schools serving more affluent communities. Nevertheless the group of schools of concern here certainly cannot be described as being located in privileged areas, thus the argument that the hegemonic masculinity is that of laddish masculinity appears plausible.

Thus a major barrier to raising boys' achievement in the group of schools forming the focus of this paper is the hegemonic laddish culture prevalent in the local community. The 'originator' or lead school in this 'triad' (or group) of schools working with the *Raising Boys' Achievement Project* has made considerable progress in raising achievement, particularly of boys, by taking an explicitly socio-cultural approach that encompasses a number of innovative strategies that directly address the issue of laddish culture and it is to this I now turn.

Originator School, Triad 7

The originator school of triad 7 is a mixed 11-16 comprehensive school in a deprived inner-urban authority in North West England with approximately 1100 students on roll. The school serves the immediate postal code area and its intake is largely white working-class students of which roughly one third are eligible for free school meals. Ethnic minority students form a very small proportion of the population (approximately 1%), and whilst it is noted that ethnicity influences the construction of masculinity, this is not the concern of this paper. I focus here on the white working-class majority.

The school in its current form dates from 1990 following restructuring within the LEA, although a 14-18 school had previously existed on the site. At inception the school had a poor reputation and few staff from the previous establishment remained in post. Several long serving members of staff, including the current Head recall what they describe as 'the bad old days of the early 1990s' when the school was not a safe environment; vandalism was rife, the buildings were frequently broken into, fires weren't unknown and bullying and fights were commonplace. Incidents in school merely reflected the disaffection and violence in the local community, where levels of unemployment were and continue to be high following the collapse of local heavy manufacturing industry. Despite great changes within the school community the Head describes the locality still in terms of routine violence and crime, often related to drug dealings. Indeed a number of students were involved in an ecstasy-taking incident which was splashed across the national press in the summer of 2001. Not surprisingly in this context the school aims to create a community that is 'non-violent, honest, fair and tolerant' (quoted from the school's 1997 Ofsted inspection).

Despite these challenging circumstances the school has been able to transform its reputation and is now a highly successful school. Attendance and punctuality have improved immensely and exclusions have fallen, as were noted in the most recent Ofsted report (2003). Achievement has risen from 9% of students getting five or more GCSEs at grade C or above in 1992 to in excess 65% in 2003. GCSE results by gender from 1994 to the present are summarised in table 1.

Although the results fluctuate from year to year it is clear that the overall trend is one of sharply rising attainment (well above the national rate of improvement in the same time period). The gap between boys' and girls' attainment has tended to reduce until the last two years when it has increased due to a dramatic acceleration in the rate of girls'

improvement compared to boys'. However boys have outperformed girls in half of the last six years. This is contrary to the national picture where a gap in the order of 10% in favour of girls has stubbornly persisted despite great interest in the issue and indeed action on the part of many schools to reduce the gap following Stephen Byers, The Minister for Schools, missive in January 1998 that all schools would be expected to acknowledge the gender gap in performance and demonstrate their action strategies. It is clear therefore that this school has not only been extremely successful in raising standards generally but also boys' attainment in particular and this is highly unusual.

| | % Boys 5A*-C | % Girls 5A*-C | Gender Gap (in favour of girls) |
|------|--------------|---------------|------------------------------------|
| 1994 | 15.6 | 26.5 | 9.9 |
| 1995 | 34.5 | 46.7 | 12.2 |
| 1996 | 25.6 | 47.6 | 22.0 |
| 1997 | 23.8 | 36.9 | 13.1 |
| 1998 | 47.2 | 44.4 | -2.8 |
| 1999 | 49.3 | 46.2 | -3.1 |
| 2000 | 48.2 | 58.9 | 10.7 |
| 2001 | 56.1 | 51.4 | -4.5 |
| 2002 | 50.0 | 61.5 | 11.5 |
| 2003 | 60.5 | 73.3 | 12.8 |

Table 1: GCSE Results by Gender at Originator School, Triad 7

The Socio-cultural Approach taken

The current Head arrived at the school in 1990 and became Head in 1992. On appointment she realised that the school needed to change. She recognised that education was not valued by the local community, largely because of the lack of opportunity to better oneself locally. In such circumstances the masculinities literature discussed above suggests that laddish masculinity is likely to gain ascendancy, a view that the Head fully endorses. She believes that tackling the peer group culture is the most significant thing they have done as a school to raise achievement, particularly that of boys.

'10 years ago we got 9% A-C and were bottom of the league table. We were publicly vilified. To raise attainment we put lots of things in place like target setting, good teaching and mentoring but most important of all was to try and get into the peer culture.'
(Head)

It is clear that the Senior Management Group and the Head in particular have been indispensable as change agents. The Head gives strong leadership and has a clear vision about what she wants the school to be. She has high expectations for the school and its students and makes her presence felt. She looks to her leadership team to realise these aims. An indication of the force of her personality is captured in the 1997 Ofsted report

where it is commented that ‘No violet hidden by a mossy stone is she’ – hardly a typical comment in these blandly worded documents.

That this vision to tackle laddish culture has come from Senior Management is important, as Noble and Bradford (2000) state:

‘The acceptance of, or inability to tackle, the anti-swot culture is largely a management responsibility... schools must be, and must portray themselves as, learning organisations. There should be no place for the anti-swot culture, Schools should treat it as they do racism; there should be no tolerance of it. It is an assault upon equal opportunities and results in misery and underachievement.’ (p. 21)

It is precisely this approach the school has adopted to raising achievement. Those responsible for the school’s management, particularly the Head have tackled peer culture head on through an equal opportunities framework.

‘Equal opportunities is at the heart of our school. It is the foundation upon which all our policies and activities are built.’
(Opening sentences from the Schools’ Equal Opportunities Policy)

Equal opportunities is operationalised by recognising that students face barriers to learning and if they are to be successful, as is their entitlement, these barriers need to be removed. Over the three years the school has been working with the Project many members of staff have mentioned the phrase ‘barriers to learning’ specifically when interviewed so it is clearly part of the discourse. Barriers to learning are conceptualised to exist at different levels. At the global level it is recognised that students arrive at school with a ‘street’ culture, which is not conducive to academic success. For boys this is the laddish culture of concern. Individual circumstances may also mean that certain students have particular barriers to be overcome. More recently the Head has shifted her perspective indicating that the school aims to ‘reframe students’ experience of school so that academic success is valued, aspired to and seen to be attainable’. Hence she accepts that students are active participants in the educational process, which is more in tune with current theoretical conceptions of masculinity.

The reframing of students’ experiences and expectations is achieved in two ways; firstly by the creation of an achievement culture which offers students an alternative to the culture that often pervades their home lives:

RM *‘I’m getting the impression here, walking around, that there’s a big thing with achievement. Is that like really high profile in this school?’*

B10₁ *‘Yer, they have the Achievement Thing most of the time.’*

B10₂ *‘They don’t say you have to do well.’*

B10₁ *‘They give us a choice, but they put it one way. They just try to explain it and make it sound like a good idea.’*

B10₂ *‘They like to tell us achievement, if we don’t have achievement we won’t like get a good job or anything.’*

B10₁ 'Yer, that's another thing. In assembly they go 'If you don't get your GCSEs you're going to end up at Pandora's Pickles' or something.'

RM Interviewer

B10₁ First Y10 boy

B10₂ Second Y10 boy

The other approach complements this by stamping out anti-school behaviour and not allowing students the opportunity to opt out of learning. For this reason students have to look like students and the Head patrols the entrance hall every morning. Transgressions of uniform are dealt with harshly for instance aspiring David Beckhams were suspended from school at the start of the 2001 football season until their hair had grown back. To ensure students don't opt out of learning Y11 students are not given study leave for instance and in addition are made to attend a number of extra lessons to help them achieve their potential.

One might therefore describe the school's approach as the use of the carrot and the stick. The school actively sells the notion of academic achievement to its students by ensuring they are aware how important qualifications are to their futures. At the same time it doesn't allow those that might in other schools disengage from learning to do so by enforcing a learning culture. This approach appears to work for the vast majority as the comment about extra lessons from a Y11 boy, who was being specifically targeted due to his anti-school attitude, testifies:

B11 'You have to (go to them). You can chose, there's some you can chose to go to but most you have to.'

RM 'So it's sort of twist your arm. But that's OK is it?'

B11 'Yer, that's fine. As long as I do actually have to get on with it, they don't just want me to come for punishment.'

RM 'So how many extra sessions do you end up going to a week on average?'

B11 'About four.'

RM 'That's quite a few then. I mean it's extra hours isn't it over what you'd expect to do.'

B11 'You have to put those extra hours in if you want to get the grades that you want.'

RM Interviewer

B11 Y11 boy

Strategies implemented to raise Achievement

As has been alluded to above the school has a number of strategies in place to facilitate the reframing of students' views. An overview is shown in figure 1.

Although some of the strategies outlined, such as target setting and mentoring entail an individual approach to raising achievement, and others such as management of the classroom and adoption of a particular teaching style relate to a pedagogic approach, the main focus of the schools' work with its students is socio-cultural, through its aim to

reframe students' experiences. This ensures there is a coherent socio-cultural approach to raising achievement realised through the implementation of a variety of different but complementary strategies. These strategies reduce the likelihood of a laddish culture achieving hegemony. For instance the unwritten policy of appointing empathising men means that male staff don't tend to perpetrate laddish cultures by exhibiting these very behaviours. The pastoral system is seen as a supporting mechanism to help students overcome difficulties rather than being a punitive regime and so forth.

During the pilot stage of the research interviews with key members of staff suggested the introduction of one of the strategies, the Key Leader Scheme had been particularly influential in improving the school's GCSE results. This strategy appeared to be innovative and in principle easily transferable to other school contexts. For this reason the partner schools joining the project for the main intervention stage of the research decided to introduce key leader schemes in their own contexts to form to focus of the work for the *Raising Boys' Achievement Project*. It is therefore pertinent to examine this strategy in more detail.

The Key Leader Scheme

Some years ago the school realised that within any year group there are a handful of individuals who are particularly influential within their peer group and if these students can be brought onside in terms of the values the school is trying to get students to adopt, then it may be possible to influence their followers as well. As has already been discussed in the context of this school the hegemonic masculinity is laddishness hence the influential students exhibit laddish behaviour. Thus for the past 5 years the school has operated a scheme of targeting these students, known as Key Leaders. The scheme targets Year 11 in particular as this is when the school feels that students need most support (as often things come to a crisis point in the autumn term of Year 11) and have the maturity to articulate difficulties. Up until 2001 the scheme had always targeted boys as these were seen as most likely to exhibit laddish type behaviour and sway others, however a number of girls have also been included in the scheme in the last few years on the grounds that they were 'laddettes' manifesting the same types of behaviours and attitudes as the laddish boys involved. The approach is now so well embedded with Y11 that a similar approach is taken more informally with students in other years. A recent development has been the introduction of an academic mentoring scheme into Key Stage 3 targeting similar types of students to try and bring students onboard earlier. The scheme operates at several different levels:

- It helps the school to develop an ethos of 'it's ok to work'
- It helps to raise Key Leaders' expectations
- It attempts to get Key Leaders onside by making them feel special
- It helps to get followers of Key Leaders onside as they see the special attention Key Leaders get and want the same hence copy the growing work ethic of Key Leaders
- It doesn't allow Key Leaders to opt out so consequently others don't opt out

Towards the end of the summer term staff are encouraged to identify Key Leaders in the current Y10 cohort through staff and departmental meetings. Suggestions are forwarded to the Senior Management Group for consideration and a list of approximately a dozen Key Leaders are identified. Key Leaders may differ considerably in personality terms but they share the common characteristic that they have clout within their cohort and others look up to them. All members of staff are made aware of who the Key Leaders are and are asked to pay them special attention to help them feel part of the school.

Each Key Leader is also allocated a Key Befriender who makes a point of looking out for the student and in essence acts as an informal mentor. Key Befrienders are volunteers from the staff who get on especially well with the Key Leader they are working with. These tend either to be senior or young members of staff who have a particularly good rapport with the Key Leader, the latter usually as the result of a shared interest (for instance members of the PE department often volunteer to work with particular boys who are keen on sport). One member of the Senior Management Group who has also acted as a Key Befriender since the scheme started indicated that members of staff who are most successful with these types of students are 'those that aren't too concerned with winning every single issue; it is those that take the bigger picture of what you want them (Key Leaders) to have when they leave school'. The assignment of Key Befrienders is conducted very carefully. Not only does the Senior Management Group ensure that appropriate role models are portrayed so that stereotypes are not perpetuated (so Key Befrienders are not physical or dominant), but Key Befrienders also have to be credible if they are going to get Key Leaders to complete coursework, attend extra lessons and so forth.

Key Befrienders meet their Key Leaders regularly to discuss how things are going and offer advice and support. Meetings are often contrived to be informal – a chat in the corridor or at the end of a lesson - but can be more or less frequent and or formal depending on need and the nature of the relationship that develops between the Key Leader and Befriender. Key Befrienders may well act on behalf of the student to resolve problems between members of staff and the Key Leader, negotiate extension of coursework deadlines and so forth. Although Key Leaders are aware that a member of staff is working with them, they have no idea why they have been targeted and in interview tended to describe their Befriender as a mentor (a mentoring scheme also operates within the school).

It is clear that the Key Leader scheme is very influential in reframing students' experience of school. Most members of staff interviewed during the pilot stage of the project identified the scheme as a key factor in raising achievement in the school. The following extract from an interview with several Key Befrienders summarises the staff view well.

'Over the years there has been a considerable success rate. A kid from three years ago was here being interviewed for the lab tech job the other day. Another one from the same year, I had to go to his house on the day of his science exam to try and get him

into school, well he came in for the others and now he's at Salford University. Most of them (Key Leaders) have got to the point of having had enough of school get into trouble out of school and this has repercussions in school. In most cases they get through this in a couple of years and move on. But if they leave school with nothing, then when they emerge from the bad times they have nothing. By working with them they don't leave here with nothing. Even moderate cases at other establishments would possibly be written off and truant because of the situations they're in. At this school there are outlets and it can be managed.'

Key Befriender / Senior Management Group member

Interviews with Key Leaders also support the view that the work the school does with them has changed their perspective on achievement. The following comments are representative from interviews conducted with boys involved in the scheme.

'School says things like "come on you can do this". School says I'm capable of doing it. I don't think that. Well I am in some things, like say I was learning a subject in science that I could do then I'd be able to do it and I'd do it well. But there again now and then we get a thing where I can't do it and then I can't be arsed doing it. That's when I used to get into trouble. I've changed really because last year I would have said "no I'm not doing that" and argue about it. I'd argue back and if I thought I was right, I was right and I wouldn't change my mind.... I've changed this year. I'm trying to do work. I didn't try last year. I've changed because I've realised I've only got a few months left until I leave. I want to do well, get good grades, for what I want to do anyway. I want to do graphic design at college and I need a C in everything.'

'I was a bit shocked when I found out (that the Head was his Key Befriender) but when I went for my first interview I thought I actually prefer that she's my learning mentor instead of like another teacher because she knows me better and she talks to me and stuff and she helps me along. If she sees me on the corridor she'll say "tuck your shirt in and if I catch you again you've got an hour's detention after school". (Asked if resentful about this) No. It's not like they're doing it to get at me. They're doing it for my benefit so it's ok. If I didn't like enjoy it then – I don't enjoy it because it's school and stuff – but it's like they're doing it, they're trying to help me get my GCSEs that I need so they're doing little things that will help me keep on the straight and narrow.'

Comments such as these suggest that in most cases Key Leaders do feel valued and supported. Expectations have been raised, as the boys do want to achieve and have clear goals in mind. Furthermore it could be argued that the scheme provides a programme of emotional literacy as integral to the approach is the development of self-discipline; the boys are learning how to negotiate with dignity, how to deal with put-downs, how to develop assertiveness skills and how to manage anger. Working with the boys in this way allows them to re construct their identity as learners and indeed as boys, such that they run with rather than against the culture and aspirations that the school is trying to establish.

Preconditions required for introducing the Key Leader Strategy

In attempting to transfer the Key Leader strategy into the partner schools it has become clear that a number of preconditions need to be in place. Preconditions include:

- High expectations about attendance, punctuality and behaviour.
- Uniform policy and dress code that is consistently applied and rigorously enforced.
- School day structured so that the focus is on learning from the start (i.e. no social time at the start of the day).
- Highly structured learning time – for instance not giving Y11 students study leave but instead making them attend structured revision sessions at school. Out-of-hours support is also needed for coursework, homework and revision.
- School environment / ethos that celebrates success (for instance high profile displays relating to achievement backed up by careers support, achievement assemblies etc.)
- Pedagogy re-assessed to help persuade reluctant learners that it is worthwhile engaging with learning.

These preconditions help to establish an achievement culture, which is oppositional to the beliefs and values that are held within the locality and the homes of schools serving working class white communities. In addition for the Key Leader strategy to be effective there must be an effective target setting and monitoring process so that Key Leaders and Key Befrienders alike know what goals the Key Leaders should be striving for and what is possible. This in turn relies on effective communication and high levels of data literacy within a school.

Clearly establishing the preconditions needed for the Key Leader initiative takes time. The originator school of triad 7 spent some three or four years laying down the foundations in terms of the preconditions identified above before introducing the Key Leader initiative. However once these preconditions are in place this school's experience suggests that headway will be made in effecting cultural change. At this point the Key Leader initiative becomes crucial to win over the now minority of students maintaining an anti-work ethos.

If the preconditions are not in place it is likely that the strategy will have limited impact, as the experience of one of the partner schools in triad 7 testifies. In this partner school staff have been very resistant to the strategy to the point that insufficient numbers of teachers volunteered to act as Key Befrienders in the first instance. Teachers in this school have questioned why they should offer fresh starts to students who are constantly challenging their role as teachers, denying teachers the opportunity to teach and other students the opportunity to learn. To their mind difficult students who disrupt the learning of keen students are being rewarded with additional support that these more deserving students aren't offered. Viewed through their eyes the Key Leader strategy isn't fair and their lack of support is then understandable. Not surprisingly then the scheme has had almost no impact in terms of changing the attitudes or improving the achievement of

those involved. In contrast with the Key Leaders targeted at the originator school, boys at this school are still working against rather than with the school, which results in many confrontations with teachers. The following extract from an interview with two Year 10 Key Leaders is typical:

'I got sent out yesterday, for chatting and giving it back. I don't like that teacher. She doesn't give you a chance. I don't know why I give it back, I don't like to back down, I just mouth back.'

The boys also seemed to feel that they weren't responsible for their behaviour or learning as is expressed by another Year 10 Key Leader:

'One thing I don't understand. Teachers tell you you've got to learn and then they kick you out of lessons. And they say it's the future of everyone else as well. Well you shouldn't put me with people I'm going to mess about with.'

The relative failure of the Key Leader strategy in this school appears to stem from the lack of an achievement culture within the school. Staff that are enthusiastic about the strategy have implied that the staff as a body generally appear to have low expectations of students and the main focus has been on (poor) behaviour rather than the management of learning. It appears that staff are willing to support those who are motivated and engaged in learning but do not see it as their responsibility to offer positive opportunities to those that seem to be anti-learning, which has clearly been internalised by the students as the quote above reveals. Students that are not committed to the aims and aspirations of the school tend to be written off by the teaching body and regarded as blameworthy for their plight. However the school has now started to address some of the preconditions; the school day has been restructured so that students engage with learning from the start of the day, the uniform policy is now rigorously enforced, behaviour management is more consistent, and the School Council has started to discuss the rights and responsibilities of students (rather than focusing on rules). Although there is no evidence as yet to support his view, the Deputy Head who oversees the project feels that the school culture is beginning to change. Staff are now more willing to work with him and a restructuring of staffing means that some of these now have job specifications that will facilitate the work of the project so he is more optimistic that the Key Leader strategy will have a greater impact in the future.

Concluding Comments

Laddish masculinity may be the biggest challenge facing some schools that are attempting to raise boys' achievement. National statistics suggest that few schools are making real headway with this issue. The originator school of triad 7 described in this paper is an exception. Recognition of the extent of the problem and then developing an integrated, cohesive whole-school approach to reframe students' experiences of school seems to be the key to this school's success. Care has been taken to ensure that structural aspects of the school do not exacerbate the hegemonic laddish masculinity that exists

within the local community. Furthermore the school is making positive efforts to tackle peer culture. A crucial component of this approach, the Key Leader Initiative has been discussed in detail, as this innovative strategy has been taken up by partner schools sharing similar socio-economic circumstances. Essential preconditions have been identified based on the experiences of the originator and partner schools.

Notes

- 1 Ros McLellan is Research Associate on the *Raising Boys' Achievement* Project
- 2 For more details of the *Raising Boys' Achievement* Project visit the website at www-rba.educ.cam.ac.uk

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