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Title: And what about the girls? An exploration of the perspectives of White British

FSM (Free School Meals) females: transition, identity and achievement (Part 2)

FINAL REPORT

And what about the girls? An exploration of the perspectives of White British FSM (Free School Meals) females: transition, identity and achievement – Part 2

Introduction and Aims

The underachievement of White British pupils from low income families has been increasingly discussed in the literature in recent years (e.g. Demie and Lewis, 2011; House of Commons, 2014; Strand, 2014a; Strand, 2014b; Keddie, 2015). As explored in Fisher (in press), the attainment gap between White British girls on Free School Meals (FSM)[1] and all other White British girls is evident within the Government's summary statistics (DfE, 2013a/b). There is also evidence that this attainment gap increases between Key Stage 2 (10-11 years) and Key Stage 4 (15-16 years), with the statistical data highlighting that White British girls on FSM are one of the lowest achieving groups (DfE, 2013a/b).

When I applied for a Society of Educational Studies' Small Grant in 2012, I argued that, although acknowledged by some (e.g. Francis, 2010), there was less emphasis at the time on the specific attainment of White British *girls* from low income families. Therefore, a key aim of the project was to encourage greater discussion of this sub-group within literature/national policy. Since the project commenced, there has been an increased emphasis on supporting White British FSM *girls* as well as *boys* (e.g. Ofsted, 2013; Strand, 2014a; House of Commons, 2014). I hope this study and subsequent dissemination events and publications, will contribute further to this discussion.

As it was acknowledged that the attainment gap between White British girls on FSM and their non-FSM White British peers increased between KS2 and KS4 (DfE, 2013a/b), a broader understanding of the girls' primary/secondary transitional perspectives, together with their transitional identity and achievement was prioritised within this study. These perspectives were contextualised within a

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1.Eligibility for FSM is the '…sole indicator of the economic circumstances of the pupil's family that is collected by schools as part of the School Census …and is a widely used proxy indicator for deprivation in Northern Ireland, England, Scotland and Wales' (National Pupil Database, 2015).

broader sample of girls (i.e. non-FSM White British; FSM and non-FSM Black British, Asian or mixed race), which also protected the White British girls on FSM from identification or stigmatisation. Longitudinal, data rich case studies were used, to directly engage with the girls' subjective narratives (Ridge, 2005), enabling individual voices to emerge.

In Part 1 of the project, funded by the Centre for Educational Research in Equalities, Policy and Research, University of Roehampton, 4 English primary schools in one LA (local authority) had been identified, serving catchment areas which had larger numbers of children eligible for FSM, relative to the LA as a whole. All Year 6 girls (the final year of primary school – aged 10-11 years) in the 4 schools were invited to participate and approximately 50% selected to do so (34 participants). The majority of girls were White British, representing the ethnicity of the area; however, as stated earlier, mixed race, Asian and Black British girls were also represented. In Part 2, funded by the Society of Educational Studies, I continued to track the girls from Year 7 (their first year in secondary school – 11-12 years) until Year 9 (13-14 years) across the five secondary schools which the girls transferred to.

Research question

What are the girls' perspectives of their transition (both *during* and *after*) in relation to:
- social/emotional identity - behaviour and relationships;
- learner identity - attainment, progress and approach to learning;
- future identity - current interests and aspirations for learning and jobs?

Research design

The design construction was influenced by the sociological perspective of children and childhood, with the process reflecting '...a direct concern to capture...[the girls'] voices, perspectives, interests, and rights as citizens' (Corsaro, 2005, p.45). 31 girls continued with the project into Part 2, initially across four secondary schools (including one special school), with the majority of the girls transferring to schools graded by Ofsted (at the time) as 'satisfactory'. The project was originally only intended to track participants from Year 6-7 and, therefore, once the girls had settled at secondary school, a proportion withdrew from the project, which was not

unexpected. Other girls moved away, or were experiencing challenges which prevented their continued participation. Further information on the participants at different stages of the project is detailed in Table 1, below.

About one third of the participants were eligible for FSM, which is higher than the 21% entitled and 18% registered, nationally (Iniesta-Martinez and Evans, 2012). This higher percentage might be due to the fact that primary teachers made additional efforts to ensure *all* parents felt supported to participate. From this, a sub-sample of White British girls eligible for FSM were identified and tracked from Year 6 onwards.

In Year 8 and 9, the Government's term 'Ever 6' FSM is used to describe this sub-sample. This term recognises eligibility for FSM at any point in the last six years [DfE, 2014]), even if not received currently, which was the case with one girl in the sub-sample in Year 8. 'Ever 6' FSM pupils receive additional Government funding, in the form of the Pupil Premium, to enable schools to address the low national attainment of this group nationally and close the attainment gap (DfE, 2016).

Year group	White British girls on FSM/ 'Ever 6' FSM (sub-sample)	Non-'White British girls on FSM' (broader sample)	Total number of participants	Total number of schools (primary or secondary)
Year 6*	10	24	34	4
Year 7	9	22	31	4
Year 8	9	15	24	4
Year 9	8	13	21	5

Funded by the Centre for Educational Research in Equalities, Policy and Pedagogy, University of Roehampton

Table 1: participants in Part 1 and Part 2

The University of Roehampton's Ethics Committee approved the project and informed written consent was gained from Head teachers, teachers and parents, following BERA guidelines (2011). As parents/carers were asked to identify the ethnicity/FSM eligibility of their daughters, they were also aware of my interest in these two areas.

Each academic year, semi-structured interviews were completed with each girl,

supplemented with observations, where a *minimally participating observer* role (Bryman, 2012) was utilised. The sub-sample was observed in a minimum of 9 observations across Part 2, with the broader sample observed in a minimum of 3 observations, due to time limitations. However, I acknowledge that these were only 'snap-shots' of the girls, which were used to support interview data. Interviews/discussions with teachers were also completed, where possible, together with the collation of written pupil profiles and school reports/data.

Data analysis and theorisation

Data was initially descriptively coded as 'social/emotional', 'learner' and 'future' identities. Key discourses were then identified: in Year 6-7, the good girl discourse, defined as demonstrating hard work, effort and diligence (Jackson, 2006) dominated. From Year 7-8 onwards, one particular discourse gained in strength: 'hyper-femininity', defined as an exaggerated and emphasised form of femininity (Paechter, 2006), with the emergence of makeup, dyed hair and a greater emphasis on physical appearance. In addition, throughout the study, the 'challenges at home' discourse was evident. This discourse defined the difficulties which the girls were experiencing outside of school: e.g. disabled siblings, absent parents, and damp or cramped housing. Foucault's conceptualisation of discourse - as an instrument and an effect of power, but also a point of resistance (1979) - was used to theorise the data and demonstrate how the girls took up, resisted and moved between different discourses. Key findings are summarised below, but are discussed in further detail in Fisher (in press) and Fisher (in draft).

Key findings

In Year 7, the 'good girl' discourse continued to dominate for the majority of the girls. However, for several girls, including all those from the sub-sample, resistance to the dominant 'good girl' discourse became evident. E*xplicit* resistance was demonstrated through the emergence of the hyper-femininity discourse, as described above, together with the 'girl power' discourse, which presented girls as robust and with a strong sense of self (Aapola *et al*, 2005). Here, there was evidence of the development of what the girls described as 'attitude', together with examples of behaviour which was not compliant to the school rules. *Implicit* resistance was demonstrated through an inability to access the emerging hyper-femininity

discourse, due to a young disposition/appearance and/or an inability to access the secondary version of the 'good girl' discourse, where the 'helping' good girl, whose hard work was often assisted by teaching assistants at primary school, was less emphasised within the independent and more academically-focused secondary environment. This latter group, therefore, also experienced difficulties with peer relationships, routines and organisation.

By Years 8-9, the hyper-femininity discourse had gained further dominance. Most of the sample negotiated a 'middle person' position within this discourse. One girl in the sub-sample did choose to embrace it; some girls, including girls from the sub-sample, negotiated it through prioritising outside interests (e.g. volunteering), so that it became less dominant in their lives. Some girls were unable to negotiate a 'middle person' position, due to aspects of their identity which did not fit with the heterosexualised hyper-femininity (Allan, 2009) vision of 'doing gender' (West and Zimmerman, 1987) and, therefore, 'doing girl' - e.g. strong religiosity or homosexuality. Others continued to be unable to access the hyper-femininity discourse, being young in disposition/appearance and were 'othered'.

Also gaining in dominance through the three years at secondary school was the 'challenges at home' and/or 'personal challenges' (e.g. an individual girl's ill-health) discourses. There were examples of Foucauldian resistance to these discourses - e.g. developing a 'friends as family' discourse, to support them with the challenges which they faced outside of school or personally, through ill-health. However, there were also examples of negative intersections between the 'challenges at home' discourse and the 'hyper-femininity' discourse which affected individual girls, and they felt particularly isolated and alone. There were also examples of successes: a focus on outside volunteering meant that the hyper-femininity and 'challenges at home' discourses featured less prominently in one girl's life.

As the girls entered Year 7, the sample included girls who were, to use the language applied within schools, 'working above', 'at' and 'below the expected level' in English and/or Maths (although over half of the sub-sample were working 'below the expected level' in at least one subject). This was based upon their attainment in their Key Stage 2 national tests (Year 6). Many of the girls' attainment dipped in the first term of Year 7, but with no obvious patterns emerging. The teachers were not surprised by this. Ofsted (2015) has also identified that secondary school leader need

to ensure that transition focuses as much on pupils' academic needs as it does on their pastoral needs.

As the girls moved towards the end of Key Stage 3 (the end of Year 9), it was evident that some of the girls had not reached, or were not expected to reach, their progress targets for Maths and/or English. Aside from the identified attainment dip for many of the girls in Year 7, at first glance, there did not appear to be any other obvious patterns: the sub-sample and the broader sample were represented, including those working 'above' 'at' and 'below' the expected level. However, further exploration revealed that although academic work continued to be prioritised by the girls throughout the study, in Year 9, there was evidence of both concealment of studying, where the hyper-femininity discourse had been embraced, and name-calling, if a focus on academic work was not concealed (e.g. when actively participating in lessons). This emphasised the challenge for girls in negotiating hyper-femininity and academic success (Renold and Allan, 2006). There was also evidence in the study that negative classroom behaviour, by those who were embracing the 'uncool to work' discourse (Jackson, 2006), was distracting for some of the girls. These areas will be explored further, as the project continues, in the light of some of the girls' limited progress and the findings of Ofsted (2015), who identified Key Stage 3 progress as a national concern.

Meanwhile, low attendance and/or poor behaviour were identified in some of the sub-sample, across the attainment range, and it was evident that this could be linked to the powerful discourses of 'hyper-femininity' and 'challenges at home'/'personal challenges'. However, the majority of the sample attended school regularly and their behaviour reports were sound.

The girls remained focused on their futures. The vast majority of the sample viewed their mothers as their role models and many were ambitious regarding attending college/university. Career aspirations included a vet, lawyer or author in Year 6. However, as the girls progressed through secondary school, they developed increased interests in creative subjects such as photography and dance; in addition, beauty, hairdressing and child care also became more popular.

For my next steps in the project, I intend to track the girls in Years 10 and 11 (2016-2017), to continue to explore how the girls take up, resist and move between dominant discourses at school.

Recommendations

My research findings suggest that there is a need to recognise both the power of dominant discourses in primary and secondary schools, and the explicit/implicit resistance emerging from the girls' narratives. This resistance can be both positive – e.g. developing independence from the 'good girl' discourse; but also negative – an inability to access the 'hyper-femininity' discourse, resulting in girls being 'othered'.

Some of this power/resistance was, or could be, anticipated prior to transition, and should continue to be prioritised post-transfer. My findings pose the following questions for schools to address:

- What are the key skills which secondary teachers would wish girls to transfer with?
- Are these skills shared with feeder schools?
- How is 'transition vulnerability' defined and supported?
- Does this definition consider current vulnerability or anticipated vulnerability?
- How do we balance utilising primary teachers' knowledge of girls, with the opportunity for them to make a 'fresh start' once in secondary school?
- Is continuity between schools available for the girls? If so, what forms of continuity can be provided?

There were examples of implicit resilience which had been initiated/nurtured by the girls, or achieved through the adult support which they received. This resilience should be explicitly identified and then utilised in the girls' social/emotional, learner and future identities. It poses the following questions for schools:

- How can we identify and utilise girls' own examples of resilience?
- How can we prioritise social/emotional needs, avoid over-dependency and encourage explicit resilience?

- Girls often identified their mothers as their role models; how can this positive parental relationship be utilised within schools?

A dip in English and/or maths attainment has been identified for many of the girls in their first term of Year 7. In addition, some girls had not reached, or were not expected to reach, their academic targets for maths and English, as they moved towards the end of Key Stage 3 (Year 9). In discussions with schools, it would be useful to investigate the following recommendation made by Ofsted (2015):

- Do schools have shared literacy and numeracy strategies which will enable all the girls to build on their Key Stage 2 attainment?

In addition, we know that some of the girls were not always comfortable in demonstrating their active engagement in lessons and learning and/or had been distracted by peer behaviour. Further research is required, to explore whether this might be influencing the girls' Key Stage 3 progress.

Significance and dissemination

This study is significant, as no other research has exclusively explored, using data-rich case studies, the perspectives of White British FSM girls, across these areas and, in particular, the KS2/3 transition. Dissemination of my key findings has included the following, to date.

Academic articles:

- Fisher, H. (2013) 'White British Girls on Free School Meals: negotiating transition, identity and attainment in their first term at secondary school', *Research Intelligence*, 122, 23. *Invited contribution.*
- Fisher, H. (in press) ' "White British girls on Free School Meals": power, resistance and resilience at secondary school transition', *Gender and Education.*
- Fisher, H. (in draft) 'Moving between dominant secondary school discourses: the perspectives of girls, including those from White British "Ever 6 FSM" families' – about to submit to the *British Journal of Sociology of Education.*

Presentations:

- Practitioner dissemination meeting: 'Supporting White British Girls on FSM as they progress through secondary school', September, 2015.
- Practitioner dissemination meeting: 'Primary/secondary transition: supporting White British Girls on FSM', June, 2015.
- Practitioner dissemination meeting: 'And what about the Girls? Key findings from the project', September, 2014.
- Practitioner workshop: 'Supporting White British Girls on Free School Meals with KS2/3 transition and beyond', April, 2014.
- Practitioner focus group/workshop: 'Supporting White British Girls on Free School Meals with KS2/3 transition', September, 2013.
- Presentation: 'And what about the girls? The perspectives of White British girls on Free School Meals' Presentation at the Centre for Educational Research in Equalities, Policy and Pedagogy, University of Roehampton, March, 2013.

Flyer/poster

- A4 flyer and A1 poster: 'Research into practice' – key findings from the project, April, 2016.

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Helen Fisher
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Fisher, H. (in draft) 'Moving between dominant secondary school discourses: the perspectives of girls, including those from White British "Ever 6 FSM" families' – intend to submit to the *British Journal of Sociology of Education.*

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