



Working Class Girls, Education and Social Mobility: Aspirations and Reality in an Ex-Coalmining Community – 17 January 2019.

Speaker - Gill Richards, Emeritus Professor of Special Education, Equity and Inclusion, School of Social Sciences, Nottingham Trent University

The context of Gill's research begins with a piece of work carried out in Nottinghamshire around ten years ago focussing on white, working class girls in coal mining areas in year 6 and at the beginning of KS3 and KS4. The original findings were shared locally, particularly with literacy leads. Gill re-visited the research subjects eight years after the original work and this longitudinal study is what has informed her book. Gill's own background drove her desire to carry out 'useful' research and her experience made her aware of how little schools often know of what is happening in young people's lives, sometimes because young people choose to keep the rest of their lives separate to school, even though it can have a big impact on their lives in school.

Gill's presentation placed the focus on looking at girls and the benefit of taking time to do this was recognised. The findings will be something for the Children and Families Alliance, as a group, to take forward and use to inform action planning as a result. Consideration is needed of the impact of culture and what is happening in the community which can be different to what is happening in school or in the home.

Key points that emerged from the discussion:

- Schools can underestimate the impact they have on young people. School can be a place where they feel safe whereas home can be a place where they feel vulnerable.
- Young women who struggle to identify a role model from within their own family will sometimes recognise a teacher as a role model.
- Young women can have stories to tell but they choose not to. They can close down and be intimidated by job titles which may seem daunting. School staff need to see themselves as a holistic support; it could be a person without a title that a young person chooses to talk to. Caution is needed if the adult the young person chooses to speak to is untrained and unable to give sound advice.
- Parental aspiration can impact on the choice of secondary school. Parents think they are doing their best sending their children to the best school possible but if their

young person is not having a good experience there this can have a negative impact. In the study, where families lived in the same village influenced which school they choose.

- Perception that some teachers have no understanding of the challenges faced by children and young people and the problems they experience in their home life. It was suggested that it would be beneficial for teachers to make home visits.
- The need for schools to be able to have empowering relationships with children and young people and their families and work with them where they are, not where the school may want them to be. Children and young people need to be aware of what they need to do but that the school (and other professionals) will support them in doing it.
- Variations in the schools in the research in their capacity and ability to work with young women to identify and develop the skills they will need to meet future employment opportunities. In the less successful school young women rejected the careers' advice they were offered. The need to be offering appropriate advice, which is informed by future skill need, was emphasised.
- The role that fear of failure plays in girls' and young women's under achievement and consideration if this fear becomes worse as they get older. The importance of the impact of what they see around them in family and in their community was emphasised along with consideration of how well girls and young women are equipped to manage isolation from their friends/peers.
- Girls and young women have aspirations but don't always know how to go about fulfilling them. Sometimes it just takes one person to help them find the way. It was noted that there is an issue with aspirations and motivation reducing significantly on transition to secondary school. In terms of Nottinghamshire it was recognised that if this issue could be addressed in just two secondary schools in the same township in the county there would be a significant impact on overall performance.
- The positive impact of a school who insisted that young women attending organised visits to university open days had to take a family member along.
- The importance of talking to girls and young women about choices and explaining that working hard gives more choices; care is needed to ensure that the community does not close down the choices.
- The importance of giving parents, particularly mothers, an opportunity to have a voice within a supportive environment such as that offered by Children's Centres. Mothers have an impact on their children's attainment and need an understanding of what it is to have aspirations.
- Recognition of the distinction between the UK and the US perception of data; in the UK data tends to refer to numbers and statistics only, whereas in the US data tends to be seen as both numerical data and also intelligence. The benefit of drilling down more into the intelligence was recognised.
- Although the research considered relates to ex-mining communities, the issues it raises apply equally to other communities where industries which were the lifeblood of the community no longer exist. The impact of the issues faced by young people in

these communities can get hidden in the bigger statistical picture but for the individual it has a 100% impact on their aspirations and achievement.

- Recognition that some young people do not have peer networks that can support them in recognising and fulfilling their aspirations; this can place them at a massive disadvantage. For some young people they have aspirations to do something but they and their family and peers know no-one who has knowledge or experience of this. This puts them at a significant disadvantage to young people who have contacts with, or know people who have contacts with, individuals who work in these fields/have had exposure to this training or education and may be able to provide useful work experience or talk to them about what they do/have done.
- Work experience can be scary and some young women said they would find it helpful if they could go to placements in pairs. The benefits of talking to parents about work experience and what it entails were also recognised.
- Recognition of the importance of adolescent brain development and the impact of peer pressure and the need to support young women in having the confidence to carry on and build resilience. The trio of processes: thinking, doing and feeling all need to be in place to make people ready to learn; for some young women they do not reach this place until into adulthood as demonstrated by the number of mature students in the group from Nottingham Trent University interviewed as part of the study.
- A lot was learnt from the hopes and fears that the young women involved in the research expressed; some of the things they were thinking about were things which should not have had to be their concerns at their age.

The following links to information about the research project:

<http://theconversation.com/what-its-like-growing-up-as-a-working-class-girl-in-the-uk-93403>

More information is available about Gill at <https://www.ntu.ac.uk/staff-profiles/education/gill-richards>