

Headlines

Teacher Focus Groups

Focus Groups

June 2026



01 Group Details

Date/time	In-person/ online	Facilitator	Group Specific Details		
			Phase	Location	Gender
Wednesday 26th November 6-7.15pm	Online	Ed Dorrell	Primary	South West	Mixed
Wednesday 26th November 7.30-8.45pm		Dr Sally Burtonshaw		South West	
Thursday 27th November 6-7.15pm	Online	Ed Shackle	Primary	West Midlands	Mixed
Thursday 27th November 7.30-8.45pm	Online	Dr Sally Burtonshaw	Secondary	West Midlands	Mixed
Wednesday 3rd December 6-7.15pm	Online	Dr Sally Burtonshaw	Primary	North East	Mixed
Wednesday 3rd December 7.30-8.45pm		Katie Carr		North East	



02 Headlines

Group 1 (Primary, South West)

1. This was a group of mainly female primary school teachers from the South West.
2. **The overwhelming description of life in participants' schools was that they were frantically busy.** There was little time to innovate or do things differently: the curriculum and timetable as overwhelming.
3. As a result, **both teachers and students were overwhelmed by expectations on their time and energy.**
4. **The question of the purpose of school split participants**, with some leaning towards academic outcomes – and underpinning the education that was to come later – with other more ethereal ideas such as socialisation, happiness and “developing a love of learning”.
5. **Participants, when pushed, believed that the idea of success for their pupils and their families was split along class lines.** Parents who had achieved academic success were much more likely to push for their children’s results to follow, while those who hadn’t done well in school much more likely to prioritise happiness and socialisation.
6. **When introduced, the issue of white British w/c performance almost embarrassed the group**, with participants instinctively addressing the class (e.g. FSM performance) part of the question.
7. However, when pushed, **all members of the group volunteered examples from their schools of students from BAME and immigrant communities – often with the help of their ambitious parents - who were thriving**, contrasting these stories with those of their WWC peers, who were not.
8. **Participants almost completely blamed WWC parents**, strongly suggesting that there was little schools could do if mums and dads refused to engage with the process of education. Participants discussed endless attempts to engage WWC parents, without any success – with some suggesting disengagement had worsened as a result of covid.
9. Despite these experiences, **participants were clear that this kind of parental engagement was key to breaking the cycle of underperformance**

10. **Relatedly, the group dwelled on the importance of careers education and “broadening horizons” as the main lever in bringing about change.** Showing “both parents and pupils what was possible and how to get there” was seen as key.
11. However, **a sizeable minority of participants did suggest that for some parents and students – those who had were clear pathways into manual trades – not focusing too hard on academic outcomes was a reasonable position to hold.**
12. **A majority of this group self-identified as WWC.** When asked what had happened in their childhood so they were able to achieve a middle class occupation, they **universally credited the ambitions of their parents.**

Group 2 (Secondary, South West)

1. **This is a group of teachers from the South West who were thoroughly demoralized by the scale of the challenges they were facing.** They spoke about a wider range of issues; the increased demands on teacher, the lethargy amongst students and the lack of trust that parents had in teachers, as well as a wide array of social problems, - particularly poverty - which were influencing behaviour at school.
2. **This group felt that the core purpose of school was no longer education** – that it had changed to become a far greater remit around pastoral support. Some described feeling like they were simply “childcare” or “crowd control”.
3. **They described their pupils aspirations as “lacking”.** There was traditional stereotypes between how they described the aspirations of boys; making money, and girls as having families. Joining a family firm was often an expectation for these young people and they were “waiting” to do so, rather than seeing education as a means to a career.
4. **The underperformance of white working class young people came as no surprise to this group of teachers.** They talked about the lack of link between qualifications and success for white working class young people and a lack of value for education.
5. **There was a strong sense that this lack of value came from young people’s home lives,** where parents did not value education. This often stemmed from the parents’ own experiences of school and a sense that many had significant preconceptions about school which were hard to overcome. Parents were also highly entitled with a “want want want” mentality.
6. **Vocational options were seen as the key to engaging white working class young people and that the current curriculum did not offer this.** They highlighted the reengagement of pupils at college as evidence of this, particularly given that many of

them were “lined up to do trades”. There was a desire to return to having a more vocational offer for students and there were examples of DT labs and catering facilities which were moth balled as these subjects were no longer taught.

7. **Some staff talked positively about extra curricular offers, although several highlighted that Pupil Premium students were far less likely to engage in these activities.** Some staff highlighted barriers such as school transport and in particular the loss of minibuses due to the expense of upkeep and staff to drive them meaning that competitive sports matches were severely restricted.
8. **There was broad positive about the CIAG (Careers, Information, Advice and Guidance) offer in schools,** although this was caveated with the fact that most young people simply did not know what was out there for them and IAG (Information, Advice, and Guidance) struggled to address this.
9. **The group heavily rejected the idea that answers sat at school level.** The group felt that the levers for change needed to be big and bold – improving the standard of living, addressing poverty and changing how schools are seen by these parents were the level of change the group thought was needed.

Group 3 (Primary, West Midlands)

1. **This was a group of female primary school teachers from across the West Midlands.**
2. **The teachers were heavily concerned about the effects of what they saw as a post-covid decline in behavioural standards.** When asked about their day-to-day, the unanimous and immediate response was behaviour, as one teacher remarked: “the minority turning into the majority”. Other issues included declining attendance and worsening social skills among pupils.
3. **Most participants emphasised that they saw the purpose of education to prepare students for life.** The teachers talked here of developing pupils culturally but also teaching them to manage their emotions and relationships.
4. **There was a belief that aspirations had changed for the worse – in part due to “mixed bag parenting”.** The group explained that gone were the days that pupils wanted to be vets or other traditional careers, and many now set their sights on being social media stars. This was seen as driven by parents who “don’t value education” and “wouldn’t know what being successful is.”
5. **They were “not surprised” by the disparity in GCSE results between white British working-class pupils and their peers and instinctively linked this to parents.** The

group, who unanimously said they were not surprised, immediately spoke of the parents. They were described as treating school like “daycare” and being “more blase” than other parents. Multiple people here made the distinction between parents of children from ethnic minority backgrounds – who were broadly seen to have more positive attitudes towards education - and white working class parents.

6. **A lack of parental engagement and perceived apathy towards education among white working-class children in their schools was central to this.** The teachers saw these parents as simply uninterested and argued that their attitudes towards education may have reflected their own negative experiences.
7. **The teachers also emphasised that they often had strained relationships with parents,** who sometimes defended their children’s negative behaviour or were difficult to get into contact with. Participants here spoke frustratedly of the regular criticism they received from parents in the playground, which they typically felt was unwarranted.
8. **They found that parental engagement improved when parents were incentivised.** One teacher here told a story of how a maths club was suffering from low turnout, but this massively increased when it was announced to parents that attendees would be entered into a draw for an Asda voucher.
9. **Throughout, they complained that the curriculum is “outdated”.** Both the size and the content of the curriculum was routinely criticised. Teachers felt that this made it difficult for pupils to engage with, and the things they did learn from it were not relevant to their lives.
10. **The teachers found that educational trips were highly valuable for their students, but attendance was constrained by parental finances.** Participants talked of the cultural benefits of trips for students, but multiple participants here explained that even though these trips were often heavily subsidised by the school, parents were increasingly being priced out.

Group 4 (Secondary, West Midlands)

1. **This was a group of secondary teachers from across the West Midlands who were fairly ground down by day to day life in their schools.** The group highlighted the many additional tasks they were being given, in addition to what they saw as their “core role”. In particular, the administrative burden of tasks which used to be given to support staff, and the increasing roles they were expected to play as wider services such as health, social care and childcare were put under increasing strain. Whilst they did not think many of these tasks were unimportant, they did believe they were outside of their remit as teachers.

2. For these teachers, readiness for later life was a key purpose of school. They talked about supporting young people to be “well rounded adults” and to “progress onto their next step”. Their definitions of success were far more rounded than purely academic success for their pupils.
3. **However, these teachers felt like there was a significant disconnect between what their definitions of success were for their pupils, and the pupils’ own definitions.** They described their pupils as having “low aspirations”, and specifically that their aspirations were about “working with their father or in the family business”, which was seen by these teachers as a less aspirational pathway.
4. **They were unsurprised by the disparity between white working class young people’s outcomes and their peers and felt it reflected their own daily experiences.** Several agreed that these was the demographic who populated their “bottom” or “lower” sets in their schools. When asked why this was the case, they had a range of suggestions including the changing nature of jobs for these communities, “these are children whose grandparents worked in factories, and now the factories have all closed.”
5. **White working class parents were felt to be the “hardest to reach”, with intergenerational experiences of school a significant part of this.** White working class parents were described as unsupportive of school, which manifest in lots of different ways – from telling young people they didn’t need to do their homework, to “taking the word of the kid over the professional”.
6. **White working class young people were felt to be getting less support to be educationally successful than their peers.** Teachers sympathised with some of these reasons, such as parents working multiple or shift jobs. However, others described an “entitlement to education”, and a sense from students that the option to resit was seen as a default or safety net which demotivated them.
7. **The curriculum offer and the focus on exams was seen as a driving factor in the poor engagement from white working class young people.** Teachers spoke about the subjects that young people enjoyed, including PE and creative subjects being reduced in favour of maths, English and science. One PE teacher spoke of his frustration that PE had been reduced when they reached “the hardest kids”. In contrast, one participant who taught in a school with a more vocational curriculum spoke positively about the engagement of their pupils, which they attributed to this.
8. **Staff spoke positively about the extra curricular offer at their schools,** although for several spoke about the “stop start” nature of clubs depending on staff availability and incentives e.g. each staff member being required to run a club for half a term. Some

challenges included school transport restrictions and very short break and lunch time for pupils. For older pupils, many of the times when extra curricular would be available was taken by interventions. One teacher talked about formalizing extra curricular and sign up through an app, which had been well received by parents.

9. **Teachers were also broadly positive about CIAG in their schools, with many citing the different opportunities available for their pupils including work experience, 1-1 IAG meetings and careers talks.** When challenged on the mismatch between this and the outcomes of pupils, there was a sense that whilst the offer was available, the quality of this was not always aspirational, “not every girl in the Black Country wants to be a hairdresser” and that broader expectations of staff, pupils and their families was not high (or high enough).
10. **This group were absolutely clear that whilst the outcomes for these pupils was clearly an issue, fixing it was not their remit.** They spoke about the need for big societal changes, early intervention (Sure Start was raised by several), closer work with parents and more out of school experiences. However, they were adamant that they were already doing too much with too little and anything further than this simply could not be delivered.

Group 5 (Primary, North East)

1. **This was a group of primary teachers in the North East of England** who were keen to stress two things; first that **they loved what they did** and second, that it was **getting harder and harder to do so.**
2. **Issues related to SEND dominated the discussion**, regardless of the topic of conversation - these teachers were hugely concerned about the increase in SEND needs (diagnosed and suspected) and the support available to tackle this.
3. **They agreed that whilst the purpose of teaching should be to educate children** (and they were inspired by this), their primary role was to ensure that children were looked after and care for appropriately and that ensuring this baseline took up increasing amounts of their time and bandwidth.
4. **They spoke about “pressure from every angle”** with the sense that the academic demands from Government were rising but that the pastoral demands and needs of the children and families were rising too - with no additional capacity to fulfil either requirement.
5. **When asked about the underperformance of white working class young people this group were entirely unsurprised.** They highlighted the challenges many of these

children arrive at school with - that they are already behind - and the fact that they do not catch up over the course of primary education, but rather fall further behind. They thought it was obvious that this would continue throughout their educational career.

6. **A huge proportion of the problems were attributed to poor parenting and lack of parental support for education.** Moreover, they spoke of a “culture of entitlement” where parents made unreasonable demands of schools.
7. **When it came to engaging parents in their child's education, several spoke of lower stakes celebration events which were better attended than formal education focused events such as parents evening.** However, there was a sense of frustration that the parents who these teachers most wanted to engage with over their child's education were frequently the ones absent from events.
8. **The curriculum was also criticised by these teachers as being “jam packed” and not leaving time for the skills it was felt children actually needed.** Similarly to parents this appeared to focus on “life skills” and emotional regulation.
9. **Whilst most of these teachers were positive about the extra curricular offer -** which was defined by the interests of the teachers - **they were concerned that it was seen by parents as childcare rather than to develop their child's interests and skills.** Several reported children attending because they were compelled to by parents, not because they wanted to.
10. **When it came to what needed to change, this group felt that radical change was needed.** They wanted an overhaul of the curriculum, reducing what they saw as unnecessary admin (or employing support staff to do this), additional places for people with SEND and more funding, particularly for recent announcements e.g. extra-curricular. However, a clear message was that the way in which parents engaged with school had to change in order for things to really improve.

Group 6 (Secondary, North East)

1. **This was a group of secondary teachers all based in the North East, in a mix of urban and rural settings, and a mix of subjects and experiences.** Most were broadly positive about teaching, but said that their day-to-day workload had significantly increased this year and in recent years. They struggled to pinpoint what was driving this, some noting that it came from changing senior leadership in their schools, while others said it was probably more to do with the number and complexity of things required of them increasing.

2. **For this group of teachers, the purpose of school was quite a broad, rounded one: equipping children with the social skills, life skills and confidence to do well in life.** One English teacher in the group spoke about how she sees her role as focussing on getting children a 4 or 5 in GCSE English so that they have access to opportunities, but this was strongly contested by all of the other teachers in the group. Another teacher said, and others agreed, that school was about giving children as many options as possible – giving them breadth of high quality experiences and teaching so that they can choose what they want to take forward. The vast majority of this group felt there was too much emphasis placed on grades and academic achievement and that school should be about much more than this.
3. **When asked what success looks like for the children and families at their school, they all spoke in terms of exam results and access to jobs and careers.** There was a clear sense that they thought children and parents had a much more utilitarian view of education than they did as teachers. Some of the more experienced teachers also reflected back 20 years and said how much this had changed during the time they had been a teacher.
4. **The teachers in this group were unsurprised by the difference between white working class outcomes compared to their peers.** While some wanted to disagree with the basis of the statistic or understand it in more detail, the vast majority visibly shrugged and nodded while it was being read out to them – a marked difference to the responses in some of parent groups we have run.
5. These teachers came from areas where, as well as white working class, they also have a lot of EAL pupils. **They jumped straight into talking about the difference in parental roles, expectations and engagement** between these two groups, noting that white working class parents were much less involved and interested in their children's education, set different standards at home, and generally were much less likely to think of themselves as having a key role in their child's education.
6. **Many teachers spoke about parental engagement quite passionately and with significant frustration.** They felt that they were fighting a losing battle when they were trying to educate these children while they are in school, but the parents were not playing their part. They spoke at length about struggling to be able to contact parents to discuss progress or issues that their children were experiencing and about lack of engagement with parents' evenings and other events.
7. A couple of teachers also spoke about curriculum-related challenges for this group of pupils, where **they felt that measuring white working class pupils' success using GCSE English and Maths was not the right measure**, and these pupils should have

opportunities to be successful in other ways. One spoke about an example of a white working class child failing their GCSEs and then not having access to a welding course they wanted to go on – this teacher felt those GCSEs shouldn't be a requirement or a blocker to that child taking that course.

8. **They also spoke about the challenges of multi-generational disadvantage.** Some of these teachers worked in ex-mining towns and villages and they spoke about how pupils in their schools only had experience of their parents and grandparents being unemployed and at home. The teachers felt this limited ambition and there was an assumption for these children that they would follow in their parents' and their grandparents' footsteps.
9. **This group of teachers felt that smaller class sizes would help them to be able to support white working class pupils more effectively.** One said that when they had to deal with a class of 30 pupils, 10 of which might have SEND, without a teaching assistant, it was very difficult to be able to give individual children the specific support they need. They felt that hiring more teachers to create smaller class sizes would help them improve outcomes for this group the most. One teacher said that he knew the data on smaller class sizes wasn't compelling, but that all of the teachers in this group were saying that it would help, so there must be something wrong with the evidence base here.
10. **There were some subject-specific interventions that were mentioned** as being helpful for disadvantaged children, including in science and music, but generally, for this group of teachers, solving the problem for white working class children was about big government-led change rather than in-classroom interventions. Some said more funding from the government, but beyond class sizes it wasn't clear what this funding would be for or how it would be directed towards this group of children.