“Naughty boys” trying to learn

“Naughty boys” in the media: image from the Channel 4 gang and drugs drama “Top Boy”

Teacher expectations can constitute a self-fulfilling prophecy: teachers behave differently towards children depending on their expectations of them. The ways in which teachers treat students affect students’ self-concept, motivation, achievement and aspirations. Over time, the performance of high-expectation students will increase and the performance of low-expectation students will decline, until student performance and behavior closely conforms to what was expected of them in the first place (for an overview of teacher expectations and labelling, see Rist 2015).

Teacher expectations don’t just come out of the blue but are related to social stereotypes: they are gendered, classed and raced. As we say last week, working-class Hispanic boys in the USA get a poor deal in formal education. The same is true of working-class ethnic-minority boys in many other contexts around the world.

A 2008 study of the mismatch between student aspirations and teacher expectations poignantly illustrates this point and shows how formal education can serve to limit, rather than expand, opportunities for teenage migrants. The researcher, Melanie Cooke, followed three teenage migrants in London schools over a period of six months.

At the time, the three boys were 16 and 17 years old. We meet Felek, an unaccompanied refugee from Iraqi Kurdistan, whose family had pooled their resources to smuggle him out of Iraq and across Europe almost two years earlier. We meet Carlos, an asylum seeker from Angola, who had arrived in London with his family about a year earlier. And we meet Santos, a Portuguese national, whose parents are from Angola and Cabo Verde, and who had come to London to live with his grandmother.

All three boys have high aspirations: first, they want to learn English and find a place in London where they fit in; something that seems impossibly difficult to achieve. They are disappointed with the slow progress of their English language development, and they are struggling with the fact that, in the one to two years they have been in London, they have not been able to make a single local friend. Felek has met other Kurds and also spends time with other young asylum seekers from Albania and Somalia. The friendship networks of Carlos and Santos are exclusively with other Portuguese speakers.

While they are keen to make friends and find a place where they “fit,” they are frequently harassed by local youths, and conflict and fights are a regular part of their experience.

All three boys have high expectations of their future, and all three see themselves as studious and academic. Felek dreams of becoming an engineer or a doctor to give back to his family and homeland. However, none of the three has received any guidance regarding educational pathways and, other than "studying hard" have only the vaguest ideas how their dreams might be achieved.

In sum, Felek, Carlos and Santos see themselves as fundamentally “good boys,” who have been through a lot already, who see migration to the UK as an opportunity, and who want to make the most of this opportunity to
further their careers and to make a contribution to society.

Unfortunately, that is not how educational policy makers and their teachers see them.

As regards educational policy, as teenage arrivals they simply fall between the cracks of the educational system. While new arrivals up until the age of 16 are sent to mainstream schools in the UK, arrivals above this age are treated as adults and are offered English language classes designed for adults, from all kinds of backgrounds, who lack basic vocational skills (for an overview of educational provisions for refugee youths in Australia, see Moore, Nicholas & Deblaquiere 2008). The classes are designed to teach numeracy, literacy and English that will allow graduates to transfer into a vocational course and to become “job-ready.” Other than English language training, no pathway that would continue their secondary education is available to them because no one ever seems to have envisaged that teenage migrants might have educational aspirations.

As regards their teachers, they know next to nothing about their students’ life outside the classroom and so draw on stereotypes about Middle Eastern and black male adolescents in their interactions with their students: they see them as ignorant young men who lack discipline and who have no past and no future. As one teacher puts it: “they come to this country … they get off the plane and they have no idea … about anything” (quoted in Cooke 2008, p. 32).

The teachers, both of who are middle-class women, one British Asian and the other white British, in particular react to what they see as the boys’ sexism. Carlos and Santos, for instance, have both been banned from interacting with younger girls in the mainstream school to which their English-language program is attached. Supposedly, this was because the boys were causing trouble. However, Carlos’ and Santos’ explanation of the event that led to the ban is quite different: in their account, another young boy, who is also a recent arrival from Angola, one day went to school wearing girls’ pants. According to Carlos, this is what happened next:

So those girls noticed he had women’s trousers. So they started teasing him. He doesn’t speak English very well … so the only thing he did was answer back, and because we were in the middle, they blamed us all. And they said if you do anything more, they will throw us out of school. (Quoted in Cooke 2008, p. 29)

This innocuous story contrasts with the teacher’s view of Carlos as a “gangster rapper” and “the naughtiest of the naughty.”

One way to control the boys and to keep the dreaded “gangster” that the teachers believe to be lurking inside the boys at bay is through sticking strictly to the curriculum and through controlling classroom interactions in minute detail. As a result, valuable opportunities for the boys to find their voice in English are lost. Felek’s class, for instance, at one point reads a text about the refugee journey of an Afghan boy. It is a story that not only Felek but most students in the class can relate to well, and some had, in fact, watched a TV show about asylum only the night before. Therefore, they are keen to talk about the text and discuss it. However, the teacher stifles these attempts at discussion and sticks to her lesson plan, which treats the text only as basis for comprehension exercises, new vocabulary practice, reading aloud, and as a gap fill exercise.

The researcher concludes that school is not a good place for Felek, Carlos and Santos:
The learners described in this article are, educationally speaking, getting the worst of all worlds, despite the intentions of their teachers. A large part of the blame for this must be laid at the door of policy makers who fail to address ESOL teenagers as whole people with transnational, diasporic complexities and aspirations and who regard teachers as technicians. Blame might also be laid at the door of teacher education, which fails to envisage the potential of education as an arena for social transformation or to encourage teachers to develop as “transformative intellectuals.” (Cooke 2008, p. 37)

As Western societies are struggling to comprehend why so many young men from immigrant backgrounds are turning “bad,” Cooke’s research offers us a glimpse of how such large social processes play out in everyday interactions: how students become not what they hope to become but what others expect them to become.

References
