

Laidlaw Scholarship Multi-Academy Trust Research Project

The Learning Games: To what extent can game-based learning increase the classroom engagement and academic attainment of GCSE Year black students in Multi-Academy Trusts?

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Rationale

Because academies are not required to adhere to the national curriculum, they have greater flexibility in what content teachers teach, and how this is done.¹ Across schools in England, students who qualify for free-school meals, those from the Romani background, and black students statistically achieve amongst the lowest 'Attainment 8' scores (this measuring a pupil's achievement in eight GCSE subjects, including English and Maths).² Academies were introduced in the early 2000s to reinvigorate schools performances (both academically, and amongst staff). The process of a school becoming an academy was heavily simplified by the Conservative Government under the Academies Act (Great Britain 2010) – which removed the element of one needing a sponsor to convert to one.³ Because of the greater level of autonomy that academies carry – which includes arranging the curriculum, and establishing the staff's rate of pay, having a centralised governance set-up, and having their stream of income come directly from sponsors – they should presumably be effectively combatting the low-attainment issue, however, as cited by the National Education Union, according to the Department for Education, and the House of Commons Select Committee on Multi-academy Trusts ('MATs'), the added performance value (measuring pupil attainment) of 2/3 of MATs was below average.⁴ In addition, the National Foundation of Education Research found that there existed no 'compelling evidence' that a school's academy status improved the performance of free-school pupils. Thus, what the evidence suggests is that despite the increased presence of academies, there is yet to be a correlation between funding, and increased autonomy, and tangible academic achievements amongst certain pupils.

A common method of teaching is that of a 'teacher-centred approach' whereby as stated by Lathan, students are treated as 'empty vessels' who exist to regurgitate the information passively given to them by their teachers.⁵ It is the method which is best encouraged by the transition to 100% exam assessments adopted within GCSEs and A Levels. I intend to look at if we integrate a more technological and 'hands-on' approach to learning, what impact it will subsequently have in not only exam performances, but also how students view education in general.

Given the fact that 77% of secondary schools are academies (Department for Education 2015), the academies model is one which is becoming more commonly

¹ Department for Education, 'Types of Schools' (*gov.uk*) < <https://www.gov.uk/types-of-school/academies> > accessed 4 July 2021

² Department for Education, 'GCSE Results (Attainment 8)' (*gov.uk*, 6 April 2021) < <https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/education-skills-and-training/11-to-16-years-old/gcse-results-attainment-8-for-children-aged-14-to-16-key-stage-4/5.0> > accessed 4 July 2021

³ Academies Act 2010

⁴ National Education Union, 'Academy Status, Pupil Attainment and School Improvement' (*neu.org.uk*) < <https://neu.org.uk/policy/neu-case-against-academisation> > accessed 4 July 2021

⁵ Joseph Lathan, 'Complete Guide to Teacher-Centered vs. Student-Centered Learning' (*onlinedegrees.sandiego.edu*) < <https://onlinedegrees.sandiego.edu/teacher-centered-vs-student-centered-learning/#:~:text=Sometimes%20called%20the%20%E2%80%9CSage%20on,listening%20to%20and%20absorbing%20information> > accessed 27 December 2022

adopted, as such it is imperative that we take advantage of the flexibility it offers, to find out what teaching and learning methods have the greatest long-term effect on the academic attainment of the most disadvantaged students – to then implement in other types of schools. In addition, the global pandemic has amplified the discrepancies surrounding learning and access to quality education. If we can assess how sponsored schools can positively influence students' learning capabilities, this could, again, be translated and adapted to be used in public schools as well.

The overall purpose of this research project is to challenge current teaching methods applied in multi-academy trusts, to ensure that they are utilising the most current and effective tools to increase the engagement and subsequent attainment of black students – who are amongst those who are least likely to achieve high attainment 8 scores.⁶

The key themes which overlook the research project are learning acquisition and retention, teaching methods within the classroom, race, and cultural & social capital.

The report will begin by defining the key repeated sociological terms in this document, before moving on to describe the authors conjectures in relation to what impact game-based teaching could have on increasing the academic attainment of black pupils in secondary schools. Afterwards, the report will move to briefly explain its methodology and ethics, before summarizing the work that was completed during the six-week time frame of this project.

The main body of this report is divided in four sections. Section one covers how accountability within Multi-academy Trusts, section two explores game-based learning in further detail, and section three covers external factors affecting the academic attainment of black students.

Definitions

Within this report we will define these words as follows:

- Academic attainment – For the purpose of this research project, we will be limiting this to classroom assessments conducted termly.
- Attainment 8 – 'The average measure of an individual student's progress across their 8 best performing subjects which fall into three 'Attainment 8 buckets'⁷
- Black student – Any pupil who identifies themselves as being ethnically black (African, British, Irish, Caribbean etc.)
- Game-based teaching – teaching methods which utilise game functions to increase a student's motivation to learn.

⁶ Department for Education, 'GCSE Results (Attainment 8)' (gov.uk, 6 April 2021) < <https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/education-skills-and-training/11-to-16-years-old/gcse-results-attainment-8-for-children-aged-14-to-16-key-stage-4/5.0> > accessed 4 July 2021

⁷ Department for Education, 'Progress 8 – How Progress 8 and Attainment 8 Measures are Calculated' (2016) < https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/561021/Progress_8_and_Attainment_8_how_measures_are_calculated.pdf > accessed 4 July 2021.

Conjectures

The increased implementation of game-based teaching – particularly games which encourage active recall and spaced repetition – will *engage* black students enough to raise their enjoyment of learning, classroom engagement, and academic attainment.

The increased implementation of game-based learning methods will only *slightly* increase students' enjoyment of learning, classroom engagement, and academic attainment.

The increased implementation of game-based learning will have *no notable effect* on the students' enjoyment of learning, engagement in the classroom, or their academic attainment.

Research Questions

- To what extent does one's cultural capital influence their ability to engage with classroom learning?
- To what extent do games positively influence a pupil's cognitive function?
- What factors can influence a student's ability to recall information?

Methodology & Ethics

Due to the short timescale of this research project, I am only able to give a hypothetical view of how I would have intended to complete qualitative research. The intent would have been to interview MAT governing staff, headteachers, and teaching staff to measure to what extent sample schools are implementing and integrating game-based learning to their curriculums, and what other methods they are using to decrease the attainment gap between pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds, and their more privileged counterparts.

Sample questions:

- How does your school currently ensure that the way teachers engage with the classroom targets different students?
- What is your school's thoughts on game-based learning?
- To what extent has classroom activities such as 'Kahoot' helped to enhance the learning experience of students?

Sample size:

- Six MAT secondary schools (two from a different MAT each)

Proposed personal data to collect:

- Name, occupation, race, and gender

Data Processing and Protection:

- University of Leeds Research Participant Privacy Policy.⁸

Summary of Work Completed

A summary of articles read covering the maintenance and accountability of MATs, and Academy Trusts' view on game-based learning and aspects of teaching methods. Furthermore, a sample size of Academy Trust schools was used to explore to what extent they have integrated game-based teaching into their curriculums, their most used teaching methods – the rationale, and results that come from its usage, and how their personalised curriculum integrates issues of race & identity.

Section 1 - On Accountability and MATs

According to Ehren and Godfrey, the best way to ensure the quality of a multi-academy trust is by means of implementing and maintaining accountability controls both within the respective trust, and from outside.⁹ They also argue that the existence of a 'regional structure' whereby schools in a trust are grouped into regions with a local board, is also needed to maintain synchronicity amongst the institutions.¹⁰ An interesting discovery from reading the journal article was the seemingly negative impact governmental interference had on the way the trust bodies observed, acted subsequently. For instance, Ehren and Godfrey identify that the distribution of resources (until year 6) is tied 'to a school's Ofsted inspection grade' – so much so that the schools which scored the lowest, were required to pay a higher membership fee – therefore breeding a 'hierarchical environment'.¹¹ Furthermore, they found that worse performing schools were more likely to be passed on to other trusts.¹² The issue this causes is that this creates a cycle whereby certain schools are doomed to fail, due to a lack of adequate funding and attention, thus resulting in the students there – who

⁸ University of Leeds, 'Research Participant Privacy Notice' (*dataprotection.leeds.ac.uk*, 28 September 2020) <<https://dataprotection.leeds.ac.uk/research-participant-privacy-notice/>> accessed 4 July 2021

⁹ Melanie Ehren, David Godfrey, 'External Accountability of Collaborative Arrangements; a Case Study of a Multi-Academy Trust in England' (2017) 29 *Educational Assessment, Evaluation and Accountability* 339.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p.356.

¹¹ *Ibid*, p.359.

¹² *Ibid*, p.359.

are already less likely to achieve high attainment scores, to do less well – thus defeating the purpose of a MAT.¹³

Francis refers to the active methods teachers and governing boards can take to improve the quality of teaching and learning in their respective institutions.¹⁴ A particular focus was drawn on ‘teacher dominated pedagogy’ – and the negative impact this has on engaging students in the classroom.¹⁵ The so-called ‘top-down’ approach is noted to cause pupils to impair their ability to take in information after a short period, and the lack of reinforcement of learning, results in students not being able to properly articulate what it is they have learnt.¹⁶ Furthermore, Francis found that another key contributor to students’ lack of academic attainment is if their school does not do enough to ensure that they have good foundations (referring to basic reading and arithmetic skills needed to get through the rest of their educational journey (as cited by a third of the institutions she approached).

The studies by Godfrey, Ehren and Francis highlight the necessity of quality governance from the top of the Multi-academy Trusts to ensure that the learning quality in the classroom is consistent, and intuitive enough to guarantee that the academic needs of all types of students are met. Funding teaching and learning methods – which can adequately engage students with the content they are learning, and not further alienating them, is key to achieve this. Thus it would be useful to look at a sample of MATS to see to what extent this is followed.

Classroom Sizes

Blatchford et al looked at how classroom sizes can impact student engagement in the classroom, particularly for those who are classed as ‘low attainers’.¹⁷ The researchers refer to the fact that the culture of ‘passive listening’ from teachers talking at pupils in class, causes said pupils to disengage with the content they are learning.¹⁸ This is because, as noted, increased class sizes subsequently increased the likelihood of a pupil being off task, and engaging in disruptive behaviour. However, an added factor to this was found to have been the attainment group of the pupils. I chose to add this article to my research because it identified that in order for game-based learning to be implemented effectively, it needs to be done in an environment where students are most likely to benefit from it.

Section 2 – On Game-based learning

¹³ Becky Francis, ‘(Un)Satisfactory? Enhancing Life Chances by Improving ‘satisfactory’ Schools’ (December 2011). <https://www.thersa.org/globalassets/pdfs/blogs/unsatisfactory_schools_updated.pdf > accessed 30 May 2022.

¹⁴ Ibid, p.20.

¹⁵ Ibid, p.23.

¹⁶ Ibid, p.24.

¹⁷ Peter Blatchford, Paul Bassett, Penelope Brown, ‘Examining the Effect of Class Size on Classroom Engagement and Teacher–pupil Interaction: Differences in relation to Pupil Prior Attainment and Primary vs. Secondary Schools’ (2011) 21 Learning and Instruction 715, 723.

¹⁸ Ibid, p.728.

Moreno-Ger et al refer to Prensky (2001)'s definition of effective game-based learning as being able to balance 'fun and educational value'.¹⁹ This could include simulations designed to subtly teach pupils about leadership, and independent thinking, active-recall, student-focused, games such as *Kahoot!* A good 'edutainment' function must be able to adapt to the learning capabilities and learning styles of students, and for maximum effect, is integrated into the curriculum, as supposed to an occasional add-on, and be adequately recorded into an attainment recording system.²⁰

Furthermore, Lu and Lien's journal article explores the extent to which pupils' perception towards the classroom environment impacts their capability to fully engage with the content they are learning in a game-based format.²¹ They use social cognitive theory base their argument that students can be categorised into 'three perception trait groups' based around how they feel about playing and learning in the context of 'game-based, virtual learning environments'.²² From their quantitative study, they found that whilst all three groups overall responded positively, students who were strictly 'playing oriented' demonstrated lower self-efficacy than their counterparts.²³ This indicates that there is in fact a correlation between learning environment and subsequent learning outcomes. If students can associate learning as something exciting, they will be more likely to be able to take in content better, because they are in the headspace to do so. The report also notes that when it comes to designing what kind of game-based learning should be implemented in the classroom, teachers should be tailoring this to the identified perception traits of their students.

A limitation they note is one that I will need to take into consideration when implementing my small-scale study next year. The lack of classification of what constitutes as a game attribute for educational games means that if we want to test out which game is effective, we need to use a large sample range.

Lu and Lien cite Merchant et al (2014) who, using qualitative data from 69 studies, report that virtual reality-based platforms had a positive impact on improving the learning of students.²⁴ This is because in such an environment, students are able to actively apply reasoning to complete tasks, thus allowing them to engage with their learning objective (albeit subconsciously).

Tulowitzki et al (2019)'s journal article explored how exactly playing video games impact children, and how that in turn could be used to support formal education.²⁵ They talk of the benefits physical, active video games already have – citing a study

¹⁹ Pablo Moreno-Ger et al, 'Educational Game Design for Online Education' (2008) 24 *Computers in Human Behaviour* 2530, 2.

²⁰ *Ibid*, p. 5 citing Polsani (2003).

²¹ Yu-Ling Lu, Chi-Jui Lien, 'Are They Learning or Playing? Students' Perception Traits and Their Learning Self-Efficacy in a Game-Based Learning Environment' (2019) 57 *Journal of Educational Computing* 1879

²² *Ibid*, p.1902.

²³ *Ibid*, p.1902.

²⁴ Z Merchant, E T Goetz, L Cifuentes, W Keeney-Kennicutt, T J Davis, 'Effectiveness of virtual reality-based instruction on students' learning outcomes in K-12 and higher education: A meta-analysis.' (2014) 70 *Computers & Education*, 29–40.

²⁵ Pierre Tulowitzki, Nina Bremm, Chris Brown, Georg Krammer, 'Using Insights from Video Games to Support Formal Education – A conceptual exploration' (2019) 111 *Die Deutsche Schule* 405.

which found that games involving physical activity increase the fitness of students, as such, if there exists a positive correlation between gaming and health, there should in theory be practical psychological benefits? This is corroborated by another study by Kuhn et al which found that playing video games impacts the areas of the brain responsible for 'strategic planning, working memory, and motor performance'.²⁶

Another aspect of consideration is how exactly a game intrinsically teaches students. The article refers to achievements. Because games are universally about receiving an objective, and being rewarded for fulfilling it, it works because students will begin to associate learning with problem-solving, and as something enjoyable, thus increasing the likelihood that they will remember and apply the content that they are taught in exams.

A key factor into the effectiveness of game-based learning would be how the information gathered from students playing the games is processed and used by teachers. In order for the game-based learning mechanism to be effective, it has to be able to demonstrate what cognitive skill it is targeting. As such, the researchers suggest that the creation of a 'standardised application programme interface' is needed, both for the data privacy protection of the student, and for the benefit of the teachers – who can just focus on tailoring they teach their content from the information they are given.²⁷

Huizenga et al. support the conjecture brought forward by Tulowitzki et al by citing Prensky (2001) - who argues that the reason why this generation of students are dropping out or failing to achieve high grades at school-leaving age is due to pupils being educated with 'old paradigms and methods'.²⁸ This aligns with my previous reading where sociologists have indicated that teacher-centred methods of learning work against the needs of students in the classroom, as it creates an environment where students are talked at, and thus less likely to engage with the content they are meant to be learning and memorising. The journal article concludes that the use of mobile games in education is a good idea because it would combine active learning (by means of immersing the player (i.e. the student) into the environment in which they are playing in).²⁹ Whilst they did find that students who played a specific game in their experiment attained higher scores on the knowledge test, they admit that a key issue with this experiment is that it was not carried out for long enough to rule out if those results were coincidental or genuine. Therefore, the article highlights the need for an experiment measuring the correlation between game-based learning, active-recall, and student academic success needs to be done in the long term in order to be conclusive.

²⁶ Tulowitzki et al, citing S Kühn, T Gleich, R C Lorenz, U Lindenberger, J Gallinat, 'Playing Super Mario Induces Structural Brain Plasticity: Gray Matter Changes Resulting from Training with a Commercial Video Game.' (2014) 2 Molecular Psychiatry, 265.

²⁷ Ibid, p.414.

²⁸ Jantina Huizenga et al., 'Mobile game-based Learning in Secondary Education: Engagement, Motivation and Learning in a Mobile City Game' (2009) 25 Journal of Computer Assisted Learning 332.

²⁹ Ibid, p.341.

Section 3 – On External Factors Impacting Academic Attainment

My reading focused on noting the external factors which can notably reduce the academic performance of BAME students in comparison with non-BAME students. Frings concluded that one's relationship with their own identity contributed to their academic attainment.³⁰ The researchers cite Steele (1992, 97), who found that the 'assessment environment' is more likely to trigger stereotype threat, thus increasing anxiety levels (and subsequently reduce cognitive capacity).³¹ Furthermore, white pupils were found by Osborne (2001) to report lower levels of anxiety following assessments.³² This corroborates the researchers' observing that one's level of identity incompatibility (which looks at how a person views themselves, based on external factors, including stereotypes, upbringing, and societal perceptions) can impact how they do at school – as such it is imperative that the learning environment is inclusive to their needs. This is why I believe that an increased implementation of game-based learning is important because, as noted in my previous readings, pupils are more likely to learn if they are having fun whilst learning – they are also more likely to develop positive social skills – including leadership and independent thinking.

Self-efficacy is the idea that students should become capable, independent, and confident learners.³³ This is fostered by a competitive, but helpful learning environment, and per to Linnenbrick and Pintrich, is something that teachers have to facilitate to ensure that all students can do well.³⁴ They suggest in their journal article that teachers need to be specific about aspects of work that a student may produce that they find good, and where they can improve ('providing scaffolding' to help the student to 'maintain accurate efficacy judgements').³⁵ They also suggest that teachers should be challenging students to complete tasks that are slightly beyond their current capacity levels to increase their cognitive function, and motivation. This suggestion linked quite nicely with previous readings that I have done, as it suggests that the constant promotion of problem-solving activities has a direct correlation with the improvement of one's academic attainment. This, as noted in Tulowitzki et al. research suggests the usefulness of game-based learning because this is exactly what the purpose of that function is – to use 'fun' elements to subliminally teach children to problem-solve effectively.³⁶

³⁰ Daniel Frings, Ilka H. Gleibs, Anne M. Ridley, 'What Moderates the Attainment Gap? The Effects of Social Identity Incompatibility and Practical Incompatibility on the Performance of Students Who Are or Are Not Black, Asian or Minority Ethnic' (2019) 23 *Social Psychology of Education* 171, 185.

³¹ C M Steele, 'A threat in the air: How stereotypes shape intellectual identity and performance.' (1997) 52 *American Psychologist*, 613.

³² J W Osborne, 'Testing stereotype threat: Does anxiety explain race and sex differences in achievement?' (2001) 26 *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 291–310.

³³ Elizabeth A. Linnenbrink, Paul R. Pintrich, 'The Role of Self-Efficacy Beliefs in Student Engagement and Learning in the Classroom' (2003) 19 *Reading and writing Quarterly* 119, 120.

³⁴ *Ibid*, p. 121.

³⁵ *Ibid*, p. 135.

³⁶ Pierre Tulowitzki, Nina Bremm, Chris Brown, Georg Krammer, 'Using Insights from Video Games to Support Formal Education – A conceptual exploration' (2019) 111 *Die Deutsche Schule* 405.

Summary & Future Issues to Consider

This project has been an opportunity for me to critically evaluate the extent to which more modern, student-centred learning methods could potentially positively impact the academic engagement and attainment of BAME students least likely to obtain high 'Progress 8' scores. As noted by Linnenbrink, Pinchard et al., whilst the implementation of game-based elements to teach contents of the school curriculum has in theory got positive practical benefits, it is overall difficult to measure this quantitatively without bringing in a control and focus test subjects to monitor over a long period of time. Furthermore, it is difficult to establish what constitutes as sufficient engagement. With specific reference to Multi-Academy Trusts, the general suggestion is that they should use the freedoms granted to them by the Department for Education to increase support for teachers across their schools, and invest in their technology to use online tools to increase engagement in learning. Given that in 2020, nearly all children aged between 5 & 15 were found to spend time online (Ofcom 2020), this would be a good opportunity to use this to influence students to use their extra time on the internet for a useful cause.

Overall, my understanding of the topic of game-based learning suggests that the increased implementation of game-based learning methods will only slightly increase students' enjoyment of learning, classroom engagement, and academic attainment. This being because whilst there is evidence to suggest that there exist clear cognitive benefits for children's' brains from gaming, there is no conclusive manner that one can research how it directly correlates to a pupil's academic success.

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Participant Information Sheet – Draft Questions

What is the purpose of the study?

The purpose of this study is to assess the extent to which game-based learning impacts the educational attainment, and engagement of black male GCSE year students.

Why are you invited to take part?

You are invited to participate because your position within the Multi-Academy Trust organisation is one that is influential to the betterment of student education.

Are you required to take part?

You are not required to take part, if you do not so wish.

What will happen if you take part?

If you choose to take part, you will be invited to take part in a 30-minute interview, whereby you will be asked some guiding questions, about how your school / organisation currently adapts the curriculum & how it is taught, to fit the specific needs of low-attainment pupils. You will not be required to have your camera on, but it is requested that the interview is recorded for the purpose of recording the information accurately.

Are there any potential risks?

There are no known risks to participating in this study.