

Learning Table 4: Ethnic Differences in Educational Achievement

Explaining Ethnic Difference

- On average, whites and Asians do better than black pupils, however there are significant differences among Asians (Chinese and Indian pupils achieving above national average, but Pakistani pupils achieving below national average)
- White pupils' achievements are very close to the national average (however white working-class pupils tend to achieve lower than that of any other ethnic group)
- According to a DfES study (2010) only 23% of white boys on free school meals gained 5 A*-C grades at GCSE, and according to Steve Hastings (2006) white pupils make less progress between the ages of 11 and 16 than Black or Asian pupils
- External Factors: factors outside the education system, such as the influence of home and family background and wider society
- Internal Factors: factors within schools and the education system, such as interactions between pupils and teachers, and inequalities between schools

Sociological Explanations for Ethnic Differences in Achievement

Analysis

External (Outside School) Factors

Evaluation

1. Cultural Deprivation

Intellectual and Linguistic Skills

Cultural deprivation theorists argue that many children from low-income black families lack intellectual stimulation and enriching experiences. This leaves them poorly equipped for school with a lack of reasoning and problem-solving skills. Bereiter and Engelmann see the language spoken by low-income black American families as inadequate for educational success. They see it as ungrammatical, disjointed and incapable of expressing abstract ideas. There is also concern that pupils who do not speak English at home (as their first language) will do worse than those who do. However, statistics show that in 2010, pupils with English as their first language (55.2%) were only 3.2 points ahead of those without English as their first language (52.0%) when it came to gaining 5 A*-C GCSEs 9inc. English and Maths).

Attitudes and Values

Lack of motivation is often seen as a major cause of failure in many black children. Most children are socialised into culture which highlights ambition, competitiveness and willingness to make sacrifices in order to reap rewards, however it is suggested some black children are socialised into a subculture that instils a fatalistic 'live for today' attitude that does not value education and leaves them unequipped for success.

Family Structure and Parental Support

Daniel Moynihan (1965) argued that because many black families are headed by a lone mother, their children are deprived of adequate care because she struggles financially in the absence of the male breadwinner. The lack of a father also means the boys do not have an adequate male role model. He sees cultural deprivation as a cycle whereby inadequately socialised children from unstable families go on to fail at school and become inadequate parents themselves. Charles Murray (1984) of the New Right perspective also argues that a high rate of lone parenthood and lack of positive male role models lead to the underachievement of some minorities. Ken Pryce (1979) compared black Caribbean pupils and Asian pupils and claims that Asians are higher achievers because their culture is more resistant to racism and gives them a greater sense of self-worth. Whereas black Caribbean culture is less cohesive and less resistant to racism, and as a result many black pupils have low self-esteem and underachieve.

Sewell (2009) argues the problem isn't the absence of the father for black boys that leads to underachievement; it's a lack of 'tough love' and adequate discipline. Street gangs of other fatherless boys offer black boys 'perverse loyalty and love', who present boys with a media-inspired role model of anti-school black masculinity. He concludes that because this leads to black boys thinking that speaking in standard English and doing well at school being viewed with suspicion and is seen as 'selling out' to the white establishment, black children (particularly boys) need to have greater expectations placed on them to raise their expectations.

Asian Families: Indian and Chinese pupils benefit from supportive families that have an 'Asian work ethic' with a high value of education. Lupton (2004) argues that adult authority in Asian families is similar to the model that operates in schools i.e. respectful behaviour towards adults was expected from the children, and in turn parents were more likely to be supportive of school behaviour policies.

White Working-class Families: Lupton studied 4 mainly working-class schools (92 white, 1 largely Pakistani and 1 ethnically mixed) and found that teachers reported poorer levels of behaviour from the white working-class schools despite the fact they had fewer free school meals pupils. Teachers blamed this on the low level of parental support and negative attitude of the white working-class parents towards education. By contrast, ethnic minority parents were more likely to see education as "a way up in society".

2. Material Deprivation

According to Guy Palmer (2012):

- Almost ½ of all ethnic minority children live in low-income households, as against ¼ of white children
- Ethnic minorities are almost twice as likely to be unemployed compared with whites
- Ethnic minority households are around three times more likely to be homeless
- Almost ½ of Bangladeshi and Pakistani workers earned under £7 per hour, compared with only ¼ of white British workers

There are several reasons why some ethnic minorities may be at greater risk of the material deprivation that results from unemployment, low pay and overcrowding:

- Many live in economically depressed areas with high unemployment and low wage rates
- Cultural factors such as the tradition of purdah in some Muslim households, which prevents women from working outside the home
- A lack of language skills, and foreign qualifications not recognised by UK employers (but this affects a minority, typically refugees)
- Asylum seekers may not be allowed to take work
- Racial discrimination in the labour market and housing market

3. Racism in Wider Society

- David Mason (2000) stated that 'discrimination is a continuing and persistent feature of the experience of Britain's citizens of minority ethnic origin'.
- John Rex (1986) shows how racial discrimination leads to social exclusion and that this worsens poverty for ethnic minorities e.g. in housing, ethnic minorities are more likely to be forced into substandard housing than white people of the same class
- Wood et al (2010) sent 3 closely matched job applications to each of almost 1,000 job vacancies, each applicant was fictitious and had a name associated with a particular ethnic group. For each job, one application came from a 'white person' and two from 'ethnic minorities'. They found that only 1 in 16 'ethnic minority' applications were offered an interview compared to 1 in 9 'white' applicants

Criticism of Sewell (2009)

Gillborn (2008) argues that it is not peer pressure, but institutional racism within the education system itself that systematically produces the failure of large numbers of black boys.

Criticism of the Cultural Deprivation Theory

Geoffrey Driver (1977) criticises the cultural deprivation theory for ignoring the positive effects of ethnicity on achievement. The black Caribbean family could actually provide girls with positive role models of strong independent women. He argues that this is why black girls tend to be more successful in education than black boys.

Errol Lawrence (1982) argues that black pupils underachieve not because of low self-esteem, but because of racism.

Keddie sees cultural deprivation as a victim-blaming explanation. She argues that ethnic minority children are culturally different, not culturally deprived. They under-achieve because schools are ethnocentric (biased in favour of white culture and against minorities).

There are two main alternatives provided:

Multicultural education: A policy that recognises and values minority cultures and includes them in the curriculum
Anti-racist education: A policy that challenges the prejudice and discrimination that exists in schools and wider society

Internal (Within School) Factors (1): Labelling, Identity and Responses

Analysis

1. Labelling and Teacher Racism

Studies show that teachers often see black and Asian pupils as being far from the 'ideal pupil' i.e. black pupils are seen as disruptive and Asians as passive. Gillborn and Youdell (2000) found that teachers were quicker to discipline black pupils than others for the same behaviour. This is because the teachers expected the black pupils to present more discipline problems and misinterpreted their behaviour as threatening or as a challenge to authority. Black pupils are therefore also more likely to be streamed into lower sets because this negative label, which in turn may lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy of underachievement. It has been found that Asian pupils were often spoken to in a childish language because teachers would assume they had no real grasp on the English language and left them out of class discussions. They were seen then not as a threat (like black pupils may be) but as a problem the teacher could ignore.

2. Pupil Identities

Archer describes three different pupil identities:

- **The ideal pupil identity:** a white, middle-class masculinised identity, with a normal sexuality. This pupil is seen as achieving in the 'right' way through natural ability and initiative
- **The pathologised pupil identity:** an Asian, 'deserving poor', feminised identity either asexual or with an oppressed sexuality. This pupil is seen as a plodding, conformist and culture-bound 'over-achiever', a slogger who succeeds through hard work rather than natural ability
- **The demonised pupil identity:** A black or white, working-class, hyper-sexualised identity. This pupil is seen as unintelligent, peer-led, culturally deprived under-achiever

Chinese students have been seen to be praised, but viewed negatively as they have been seen to achieve success in the 'wrong way' through hardwork, passive conformism rather than natural ability. Teachers stereotyped Chinese families as 'tight' and 'close' and used this to explain the girls' supposed passivity. Teachers often also wrongly stereotyped the Chinese students as being middle-class.

3. Pupil Responses and Subculture

Sometimes, pupils may choose to reject their labels and decide to prove it wrong, rather than accepting the label and becoming withdrawn. Fuller (1984) found that a group of black girls in a London comprehensive school had challenged their negative stereotype in pursuit of educational success. However they didn't do this to seek approval of teachers, nor did they show a concern about the routine of the school. They simply worked hard and achieved well in impartial external exams.

Mirza (1992) found that racist teachers discouraged black pupils from being ambitious through the kind of advice they gave them about careers and option choices, and identified three main types of teacher racism as a result:

- **The colour-blind:** teachers who believe all pupils are equal but in practice allow racism to go unchallenged
- **The liberal chauvinists:** teachers who believe black pupils are culturally deprived and who have low expectations of them
- **The overt racists:** teachers who believe blacks are inferior and actively discriminate against them

Sewell focussed on the absence of fathers, but also noted that their responses to schooling, including racist stereotyping by teachers can affect their achievement. He identified 4 such responses:

- **The rebels:** a small minority of black pupils, often excluded from school, rejected the goals and rules of the school and conformed to the 'black-macho-lad' stereotype
- **The conformists:** the largest group, keen to succeed, and accepted the school's goals and rules
- **The retreatists:** tiny minority of isolated individuals, disconnected from both school and black subcultures, despised by the rebels
- **The innovators:** the second largest group, pro-education but anti-school, value success but do not seek approval of teachers

Evaluation

Only focuses on teachers, not schools as a whole

There is a danger of seeing these stereotypes as simply the product of individual teachers' prejudices, rather than of racism in the way that the education system as a whole operates.

Gillborn and Youdell argue that the policy of publishing league tables creates an A-to-C economy and leads to large numbers of black and working-class pupils being placed in lower streams or entered for lower-tier exams, so it's not due to racism.

Ignores Success and Challenge of Stereotypes

There is a danger of wrongly assuming that once labelled, pupils automatically fall victim to the self-fulfilling prophecy and fail.

But this is not always true. However it is still important to recognise that attempting to avoid teachers' racism could in itself limit opportunities

Internal (Within School) Factors (2): Institutional Racism

Analysis

Individual racism is racism that results from the prejudiced views of individual teachers and others. Whereas institutional racism is discrimination that is built into the way institutions such as schools and colleges operate.

The 'Critical Race Theory' can be explained in education by Gillborn (2008), who applies the concept of 'locked-in equality' to education. He sees ethnic inequality as "so deep rooted and so large that it is a practically inevitable feature of the education system". There are several ways in which the education system may be viewed as institutionally racist:

1. Marketisation and Segregation

Moore and Davenport (1990) show how selection procedures lead to ethnic segregation, with minority pupils failing to get into better secondary schools due to discrimination e.g. they found that primary school reports were used to screen out pupils with language difficulties, and the application process was difficult for non-English speaking parents to understand. These procedures favoured white pupils and disadvantaged those from ethnic minority backgrounds. Thus they concluded that selection leads to an ethnically stratified education system.

The commission for Racial Equality (1993) identified similar biases in Britain. The report identified the following reasons that admissions is made harder for ethnic minorities and means they are more likely to end up in unpopular schools:

- Reports from primary schools that stereotype minority pupils
- Racist bias in interviews for school places
- Lack of information and application forms in minority languages
- Ethnic minority parents are often unaware of how the waiting list system works and the importance of deadlines

2. The Ethnocentric Curriculum

Languages, literature and music: Troyna and Williams note there is a meagre provision for teaching Asian languages as compared with European languages. David (1993) describes the National Curriculum as a 'specifically British' curriculum that largely ignores non-European languages, literature and music.

History: Ball (1994) criticises the National Curriculum for ignoring ethnic diversity and for promoting an attitude of 'little Englandism' e.g. the history curriculum tries to recreate a 'mythical age of empire and past glories', while ignoring the history of black and Asian people.

Bernard Coard (1971; 2005) says the ethnocentric curriculum may cause underachievement by presenting, in History for example, the idea that the British bringing civilisation to the 'primitive' peoples they colonised. He argued that this image of black people as inferior undermines black children's self-esteem and leads to their failure.

3. Assessment

Gillborn (2008) argues that 'the assessment game' is rigged to validate the dominant culture's superiority. Independent 'baseline assessments' in primary schools have been replaced by the foundation stage profile (FSP in 2003). Overnight, black pupils now appeared to be doing worse than white pupils e.g. in one local authority where black pupils had been the highest achievers in 2000, by 2003 the new FSP had black children ranked lower than whites across all six developmental areas that it measured. However Gillborn explains the reversal as a result of two related institutional factors:

- The FSP is based entirely on teachers' judgements, whereas baseline assessments often used written tests as well
- A change in the timing: the FSP is completed at the end of reception year, whereas baseline assessments were done at the start of primary school

4. Access to Opportunities

Gifted and Talented: created to meet the needs of more able pupils in inner-city schools, but is not seen as equal because whites are over twice as likely as black Caribbeans to be identified as gifted and talented, and 5 times more likely than black Africans

Exam Tiers: 30 schools in the 'Aiming High' initiative to raise black Caribbean pupils' achievement, blacks were nevertheless more likely than whites to be entered for lower tier GCSE exams, often because blacks had been placed in the lower sets

5. The 'new IQism'

Teachers see potential as a fixed quality that can be easily measured so they can be put into the 'right' set or stream, or onto G&T etc. Secondary schools are increasingly only using old-style intelligence tests (IQ) to allocate pupils to different streams. But this no measure of 'potential', all it tells us is what a person has already learnt to do or what they can do, not what they may be able to do in the future. Gillborn concludes that the education system is institutionally racist, creating an environment in which ethnic minority pupils are routinely disadvantaged.

Evaluation

Too Much focus on Internal Factors

Sewell argues that Gillborn focuses too much on the internal factors, and although he doesn't believe racism has disappeared entirely, he does argue that it is not powerful enough to prevent individuals from succeeding. He says we should focus more on external factors such as boys' anti-school attitudes, the peer group and the nurturing role of the father.

Over-achievement of 'Model Minorities'

Indian and Chinese students perform better than the white majority. If these two groups do so well, then how can there be institutional racism in education, as critical race theorists claim?

Other Differences are More Important

Connolly (2006) notes that there is an 'interactions effect': class and gender interact differently with ethnicity depending on which ethnic group we are looking at. For instance, there is a bigger gap between the achievements of white middle-class and white working-class pupils than there is between black middle-class and black working-class pupils.

