



INTERSECTIONALITY

Intersectionality & educational achievement at age 16

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The concept of intersectionality has been most closely associated with feminist analyses and more widely deployed in qualitative than quantitative educational research (Codioli McMaster & Cook, 2019). However, some quantitative researchers in England have long considered interactions, particularly between ethnicity, sex and socio-economic background, in the analysis of educational achievement (for example, Strand, 1999; 2014). Rather than assuming simple additive effects, an intersectional analysis is achieved through the inclusion of statistical interaction terms which allow the 'effect' of one independent variable to vary at different levels of another independent variable. This better reflects how social categories, such as race, sex and class, permeate each other and combine to create 'complex inequality' (McCall, 2005).

RACE, SEX, CLASS & ACHIEVEMENT AT AGE 16

In a recent example, I focus on educational achievement at age 16, at the end of statutory full-time education, because qualifications achieved then are key to young people's future educational, economic, health and wellbeing outcomes (see, for example, DfE, 2018). I use the Second Longitudinal Study of Young People in England (LSYPE2), a nationally representative sample of 10,000 young people who sat their GCSEs in 2015–16, which is the most recent dataset with comprehensive measures of race, sex and class (Strand, 2021).

The largest achievement gaps are those associated with family socio-economic status (SES), as indexed by parental occupation, education and household income. For example, the achievement gap between students from the 20 per cent of homes with the highest household income and the 20 per cent of homes with

the lowest household income is extremely large (0.93 standard deviation; SD), over three times larger than the gap between boys and girls, which is small (0.29 SD), and over eight times larger than the gap between Black and White students, which is very small (0.11 SD).¹

The most important thing though is to look at this data intersectionally; since everyone has a race, sex and class background, we don't hold any of these characteristics in isolation. The combination of nine major ethnic groups, by three levels of SES and two levels of sex, produces 54 unique combinations of race, sex and class. I use linear regression to estimate the achievement score for each of these groups, allowing for a significant three-way interaction and several significant two-way interactions. The results are presented in figure 1.

AN INTERSECTIONAL ANALYSIS

First, the groups with the lowest achievement at age 16 are White British and Black Caribbean students from low SES backgrounds, who have mean scores well below the average for all students. This is most pronounced for boys (-0.68 SD and -0.77 SD, respectively), but low SES White British and Black Caribbean girls are also the lowest-scoring groups of girls (-0.39 SD and -0.54 SD, respectively). Given the critical role of educational achievement at age 16 for future life outcomes, these groups of young people are most at risk of poor long-term outcomes.

Second, most minority ethnic groups have high achievement at age 16. Forty-six contrasts can be made between minority ethnic groups and White British students of the same sex and SES, and in 31 instances the mean score for students from the minority ethnic

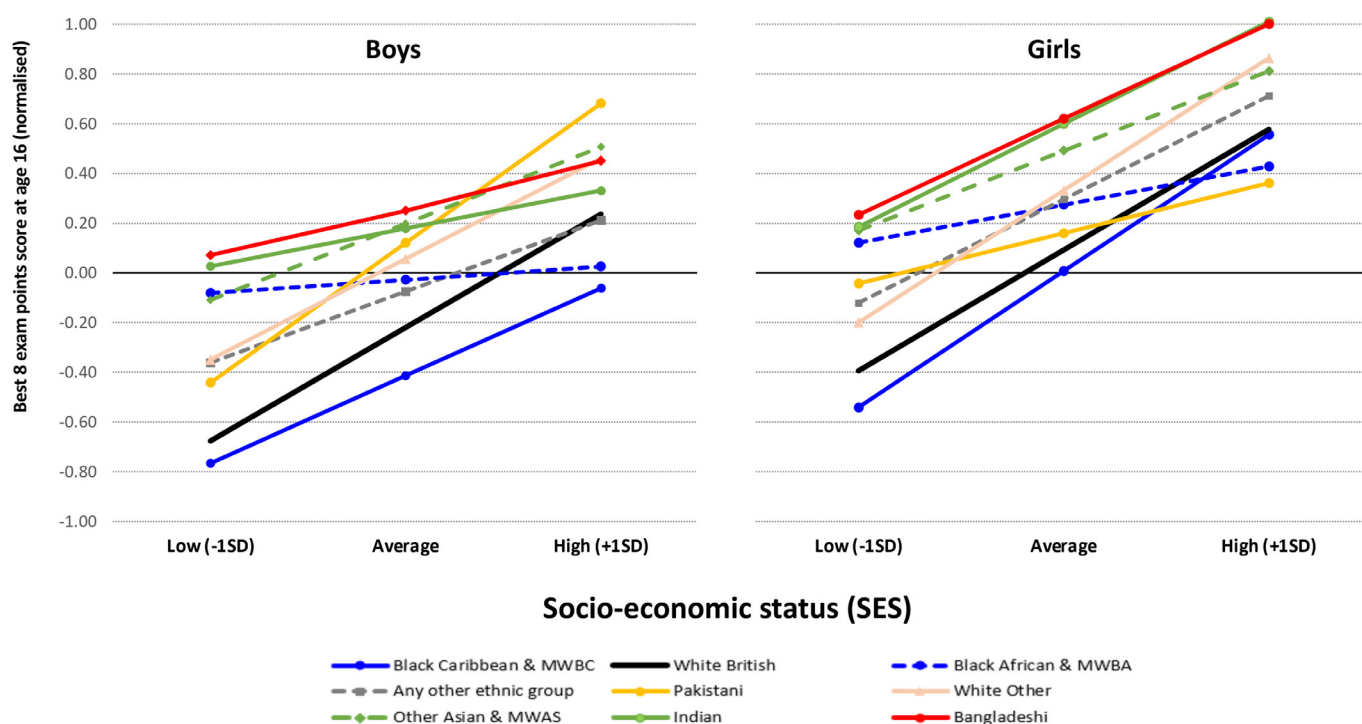


Figure 1: Best 8 exams points score at age 16 by race, sex and class combination

group is substantially higher than the White British average. An important intersectional question is what factors make minority ethnic groups so resilient, particularly in the face of socio-economic disadvantage?

Third, there is a specific instance of ethnic under-achievement, with lower mean scores for Black Caribbean and Black African boys from high SES homes relative to their White British peers. Understanding this outcome again means considering its intersectional nature, asking why it is found for boys but not girls, and why just for boys from high SES or ‘middle-class’ backgrounds?

I address the three points above in greater detail in the report (Strand, 2021).

CONCLUSIONS

Given that by far the largest inequalities in educational achievement at age 16 are those related to SES, and that an SES achievement gap exists for all ethnic groups, policies such as the ‘pupil premium’ that target funding to all young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are crucial. It remains to be seen though whether the scale of the funding is sufficient given the size of the SES achievement gap, further exacerbated by substantial socio-economic inequality in the impact of Covid-19 and the current cost-of-living crisis.

If we want to help young people do better at secondary level, and improve their chances for the future, we have to think about race, sex and class in tandem. An intersectional approach may avoid the essentialising aspects of ‘single-axis’ analyses, but even with

54 combinations, we are still working with trends and group averages. Some White British and Black Caribbean students from low SES homes achieve very highly, and we must always remain alert to the considerable individual variability within groups.

¹Following Cohen’s (1988) effect size thresholds, differences of 0.20 are termed small, 0.50 medium and 0.80 large.

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