



Education and achievement at 16

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Structural explanations focused on race, sex or class alone do not explain educational underachievement. We need more nuanced accounts of educational success or failure

EXAM LINKS

- Education
- Social inequality

When it comes to education, we cannot think about race, sex and class in isolation. When I was commissioned by the UK government to investigate how these factors are associated with academic achievement, I discovered how they all matter — and in combination. I believe that an analysis that focuses on any

one of these in isolation inevitably misses important aspects of inequality.

I was tasked with analysing inequalities in educational achievement, specifically at age 16, as part of the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities (CRED) and my report was published in March 2021. The issue was raised again in June 2021 in a report from the House of Commons Education Select Committee. It highlighted the poor educational outcomes of white working-class children in particular.

In the analysis, I focused on educational achievement at age 16, at the end of statutory

full-time education, because qualifications achieved then play a critical role in young people's future educational, economic, health and wellbeing outcomes. I looked at what historically have been the three central dimensions of inequality: race, sex and class. I used the Second Longitudinal Study of Young People in England (LSYPE2), containing records of 10,000 young people who sat their GCSEs in 2015/16, which is the most up-to-date nationally representative dataset with comprehensive measures of race, sex and class. See Box 1.

Box | Methodology

The hallmark of this approach to research is: (i) collection of data from a large and nationally representative sample of respondents, (ii) explicit and robust measures of the key concepts or constructs, e.g. 'achievement', 'social class' or 'ethnicity', (iii) careful statistical analysis to establish the relationships between the constructs.

The dataset: The Second Longitudinal Study of Young People in England (LSYPE2) recruited a nationally representative sample of 13,000 young people aged 13/14 in 2012/13, and conducted detailed 45-minute interviews with them and their parents in their homes, as well as drawing from linked administrative sources such as the National Pupil Database (NPD). The students and their families were interviewed again in Wave 2 at age 14/15 and Wave 3 at age 15/16. Of the 10,396 students who completed Wave 3, a total of 9,704 gave their permission for linkage to the NPD, thus allowing analysis of their examination results in summer 2015.

Ethnic group: In 2015, 28.9% of the school population in England were from ethnic minority groups. We present an analysis in relation to the nine main ethnic groups in England (White British, White other groups, Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Other Asian, Black Caribbean, Black African and Any Other ethnic group). Because of similarities in their achievement profiles, we analyse students of mixed heritage together with the relevant ethnic minority group.

Socioeconomic status: For descriptive purposes we focus on parental occupation as the single most frequently cited measure of social class, using the Office for National Statistics socioeconomic classification (NS-SEC). For details and illustrations of occupations within each group, see www.tinyurl.com/m5w78y7r. We take either the father's or the mother's occupation, whichever is the highest. For subsequent statistical modelling, we create a comprehensive measure of socioeconomic status (SES) that combines parental occupation, parental educational qualifications and family household income.

Educational outcomes: We calculate each student's 'Best 8' point score: the total score across the best 8 GCSE examination results achieved by the student. The outcome is expressed in standard deviation (SD) units. Therefore, the average score across all students is indicated by zero; two-thirds of students score in the range -1 and +1.

Which gaps are the largest?

It is important to get an appreciation of the relative size of race, sex and class achievement gaps, as not all gaps are of the same size. The data showed that how well students do at GCSE is related far more to social class — as assessed by parental occupation, education and household income — than to race or sex. For example, the achievement gap between students from the 20% of homes with the highest household income and the 20% of homes with the lowest household income was very large (measured at 0.91 standard deviations or SD). It was over three times larger than the small gap between boys and girls (0.29 SD), and over eight times larger than the very small gap between black and white students (0.11 SD). (Standard deviations are a unit of measurement used in statistics to gauge how far any given data point is from the average, or mean. Therefore the nearer to

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zero the standard deviation is, the more equal are the groups involved.)

It is also important to look at the data intersectionally (in combination), since everyone has a race, sex and class background, and we don't hold any of these characteristics in isolation. The combination of nine

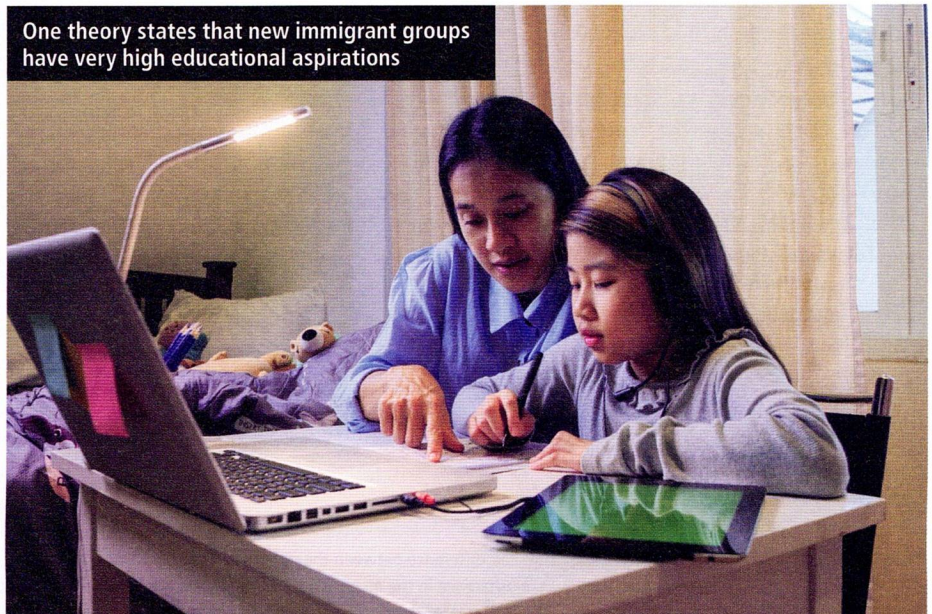
major ethnic groups, by three levels of SES (socioeconomic status) and two levels of sex, produces 54 unique combinations of race, sex and class, and we used statistical modelling to calculate the achievement score for each of these groups. The results are presented in Table 1 and Figure 1.

Which groups are most at risk of low achievement?

Looking at the 'mean Best 8 score' in Table 1, we see the groups with the lowest achievement at age 16 were 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 (-0.77 SD and -0.68 SD respectively), but low SES girls of White British and Black Caribbean heritage are also the lowest scoring groups of girls (-0.54 SD and -0.39 SD respectively). Among students from average SES backgrounds, only White British boys and Black Caribbean boys had mean scores below the average for all students.

In contrast, the overwhelming picture is of ethnic minority *success* in relation to educational achievement at age 16. The right-hand side of Table 1, headed 'Gap vs. White British', shows the 46 comparisons that can be made between White British students and students of other ethnicities but of the same sex and SES. There is no under-achievement in 43 of the 46 comparisons, and indeed in 31 the groups had a substantially *higher* mean score than the White British average. Where there are ethnic achievement gaps at age 16, they are predominantly associated with

One theory states that new immigrant groups have very high educational aspirations



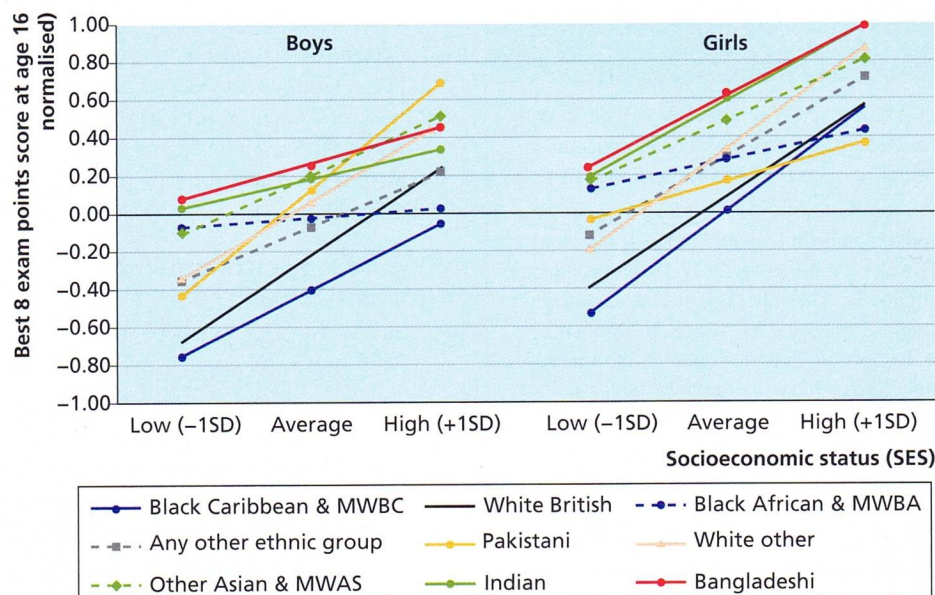


Figure 1 Best 8 exams points score at age 16 by race, sex and class combination

higher mean achievement by students from ethnic minority groups.

Why White British and Black Caribbean working-class students?

The immigrant paradigm

A key question is why students from most ethnic minority groups perform so much better at age 16 than their White British and Black Caribbean peers. Strand (2014) cites the 'immigrant paradigm' whereby recent immigrants devote themselves more to education than the native population because they lack financial capital and see education as a way out of poverty. In a similar vein, Ogbu (1978) makes a distinction between 'voluntary minorities' (such as immigrant groups who may be recent arrivals to the country and have very high educational

Table 1 Mean best 8 score by ethnic group, SES and sex, and ethnic achievement gaps relative to White British students

Ethnic group and sex		Mean Best 8 score (a)			Gap vs White British (b)		
		Low SES (-1SD)	Average SES	High SES (+1SD)	Low SES (-1SD)	Average SES	High SES (+1SD)
Boys	Black Caribbean, and MWBC	-0.77	-0.41	-0.06	-0.09	-0.19	-0.30
	White British	-0.68	-0.22	0.24	-	-	-
	Any other ethnic group	-0.36	-0.08	0.21	0.32	0.15	-0.03
	Black African, and MWBC	-0.08	-0.03	0.03	0.60	0.19	-0.21
	Pakistani	-0.44	0.12	0.68	0.23	0.34	0.45
	White Other	-0.35	0.06	0.46	0.33	0.28	0.22
	Other Asian and MWAS	-0.11	0.20	0.51	0.57	0.42	0.27
	Indian	0.03	0.18	0.33	0.70	0.40	0.10
	Bangladeshi	0.07	0.25	0.45	0.75	0.47	0.21
Girls	Black Caribbean, and MWBC	-0.54	0.01	0.56	-0.15	-0.09	-0.02
	White British	-0.39	0.09	0.58	-	-	-
	Any other ethnic group	-0.12	0.30	0.71	0.27	0.20	0.13
	Black African and MWBC	0.12	0.27	0.43	0.52	0.18	-0.15
	Pakistani	-0.04	0.16	0.36	0.35	0.07	-0.22
	White Other	-0.20	0.33	0.86	0.19	0.24	0.29
	Other Asian and MWAS	0.17	0.49	0.81	0.56	0.40	0.23
	Indian	0.18	0.60	1.01	0.58	0.51	0.43
	Bangladeshi	0.23	0.62	1.00	0.63	0.53	0.42

Notes: (a) **Mean Best 8 score:** These figures show the difference between the mean score for the group and the grand mean score across all students (which is set to 0). (b) **Gap vs. White British:** These figures show the difference in the mean score between each ethnic group and White British students of the same sex and SES. Following conventional effect size thresholds, any negative values greater than 0.20 are shown in red and any positive values greater than 0.20 are shown in blue.

RESOURCES

- Gillborn, D., Rollock, N., Vincent, C. and Ball, S. J. (2012) "'You got a pass, so what more do you want?': race, class and gender intersections in the educational experiences of the Black middle class', *Race Ethnicity and Education*, Vol. 15, No. 1, 121–39.
- House of Commons Education Committee (2021) *The Forgotten: how white working-class pupils have been let down, and how to change it. First report of session 2021–22*, House of Commons. Available at: www.tinyurl.com/t7akksfc.
- Ogbu, J. (1978) *Minority Education and Caste*, Academic Press.
- Portes, A. and Zhou, M. (1993) 'The new second generation: segmented assimilation and its variants', *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 530, No. 1, pp. 74–96.
- Strand, S. (2014) 'Ethnicity, gender, social class and achievement gaps at age 16: intersectionality and "getting it" for the white working class', *Research Papers in Education*, Vol. 29, No. 2, pp. 131–71.
- Strand, S. (2021) *Ethnic, Socio-economic and Sex Inequalities in Educational Achievement at Age 16: an analysis of the Second Longitudinal Study of Young People in England (LSYPE2)*, Report for the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities (CRED), Department of Education, University of Oxford. Available at: www.tinyurl.com/69m9e2sy.

aspirations) and 'involuntary' minorities (such as Black Caribbean and White British working-class students in England) who are less likely to be recent arrivals and tend to hold less optimistic views about social mobility and education.

This could, for example, account for the substantial contrast between Black Caribbean

students on the one hand, and the much larger group of Black African students on the other, whose achievement is substantially higher despite the same or higher levels of risk in terms of low SES. Most Black Caribbean students are third generation UK born, while many Black African students are more recent immigrants, some of whom have



The data show that race is not the main determining factor in achievement at 16

arrived directly from abroad. For example, the 2011 national population census indicates that two-thirds (66.7%) of the Black African population were born outside of the UK, compared to 39.8% of the Black Caribbean population.

Selective assimilation theory

Black Caribbean communities are not the only longstanding migrant groups. Indian and Pakistani migration to England was also high during the 1950s and 1960s. So why is the achievement profile for these ethnic groups not also closer to White British students? Perhaps relevant here is 'selective assimilation theory' (Portes and Zhou 1993). Black Caribbean migrants in the 1960s predominantly moved into poor urban and inner-city areas populated by the White British working class. Thus, Black Caribbean students may have cultural attitudes that parallel their (predominantly) White British working-class neighbours.

In contrast, Indian migrants were more likely to be of high SES in their host countries — many were professionals and managers, and migrated to a more varied and diverse selection of geographical areas. Pakistani migrants, while also tending to move predominantly to poor areas of inner cities where housing was cheap, tended to move to areas with higher levels of ethnic segregation, thus retaining greater cultural homogeneity.

Ethnic underachievement

There were only three examples of ethnic underachievement. The most notable of these was Black African and Black Caribbean boys from high SES homes who achieved less well than high SES White British boys. Understanding this outcome means considering intersectional issues. We need to ask why only boys and not girls, and why exclusively among students from high SES or 'middle-class' homes?

Many factors may be at play here, including:

- how different middle-class families deploy their capital
- families' expectations and norms
- teacher expectations in high SES contexts

Black Caribbean students may have cultural attitudes that parallel their (predominantly) White British working-class neighbours

■ cultural issues of masculinity or identity among different groups (see Gillborn et al. 2012)

No simple interpretation of achievement focused on race, sex or class alone explains the complexity in the data, and the results challenge researchers to develop more nuanced accounts of educational success or failure.

None of this denies ethnic inequalities in later educational or social outcomes, for example in terms of entry to employment, to high-tariff universities or to the highest status occupations. Indeed, an important question is why high educational achievement at age 16 does not always translate into later success for all groups? However, at age 16, socioeconomic achievement gaps are overwhelmingly the largest, with ethnic minority status typically a protective factor associated with high achievement.

The policy response

Given that by far the largest inequalities in educational achievement at age 16 are those related to social class, policies such as the pupil premium introduced in 2011 to target funding to young people from

EXAM-STYLE QUESTION

Applying material from the article and your own knowledge, evaluate the importance of pupils' socioeconomic backgrounds in explaining differences in educational achievement. (AQA-style 30-mark question)

Guidance: This essay, as all high-mark answers, needs careful planning. There is a wealth of material in the article, and you will have plenty of knowledge on this topic from your class notes and wider reading. This means that your plan needs to give a clear structure on how you are going to organise your answer. The focus of the question is on socioeconomic family background, but the article also looks at the impact of gender and ethnicity — the concept of intersectionality is important here. Note, too, that the article is looking at data pertaining to 16-year old pupils. It is important to point out that inequalities in educational achievement are present at other stages: the articles in this issue on internships and school exclusions will give you examples, and much has been written about the effects of the pandemic on the education of younger pupils. Remember at the end to draw your arguments and evidence together to come to a conclusion regarding the relative importance of socioeconomic background.

economically disadvantaged backgrounds, are crucial. Poverty is a structural issue that impacts young people from all ethnic groups, although such funding particularly supports students from those ethnic minority groups (such as Pakistani and Bangladeshi students) that are most likely to experience poverty.

It remains to be seen, though, whether the scale of the funding is sufficient given the size of the SES achievement gap, because the National Audit Office concluded in 2015

that 'no clear trend has been established and the gap remains wide'. The inequality issue has undoubtedly been exacerbated by 'lost-learning' during the pandemic, which impacted most heavily on economically disadvantaged families. The extent of the catch-up investment necessary to close the gap is only now becoming apparent.

The results challenge researchers to develop more nuanced accounts of educational success or failure

Pupil premium funding is used to fund breakfast clubs, computer equipment and additional tuition for low SES students



KEY POINTS

- The research focused on educational outcomes at age 16. It analysed quantitative and qualitative data from the second Longitudinal Study of Young People in England (LSYPE2).
- The largest attainment gap between pupils was that based on social class, measured by parental occupation, education and household income. This gap was greater than that based on either gender or ethnicity.
- It is, however, important to look at intersectionality — how social class, gender and ethnicity combine. Doing this showed that White British and Black Caribbean pupils, particularly boys from low socioeconomic backgrounds, had attainment levels well below the average for all students.
- The findings show that policies such as the pupil premium, which targets funding to pupils from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, are crucial.

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