



# Does ethnicity influence educational attainment?

## What are the patterns of ethnic minority attainment?

An **ethnic group** is one that sees itself as culturally distinct from other groupings in a society and is seen by others as distinctive. Such a group may differ from others in, for example, country of origin, language, religion, dress or other aspects of culture. Everyone belongs to an ethnic group, including white people whose ancestors have lived in Britain for as long as they can remember, so terms such as 'ethnics' are meaningless. Sociologists also avoid referring to different 'races', as there are disagreements about whether such groupings can be defined and the term has been used in derogatory ways.

Some ethnic groups, for example the Irish — Britain's largest ethnic minority — are not physically distinctive. Other more visible minorities may be subject to discrimination and harassment, including in the education system. Ever since the postwar influx of immigrants to Britain from the West Indies and the Indian subcontinent, sociologists and educationalists have been concerned about wide gaps in attainment between different ethnic groups. Why this occurs and the difficulties of reaching firm conclusions are the subjects of this chapter.

**Table 4.1** Percentages of pupils in England achieving five or more grades A\*–C at GCSE or GNVQ: by sex and ethnic group, 2004

<b>Ethnic group</b>	<b>Boys</b>	<b>Girls</b>
Chinese	70	79
Indian	62	72
White Irish	54	62
White British	47	57
Bangladeshi	41	55
Pakistani	38	52
Black African	37	48
Black Caribbean	27	44

Source: adapted from National Statistics Online



Table 4.1 shows the huge differences between the GCSE results of different ethnic groups in England, as well as striking gender differences. In 2004, Chinese pupils were the most likely to achieve five or more GCSE grades A\*–C, with Indian pupils not far behind. Both groups outstripped white students, suggesting that their progress is not a cause for concern. On the other hand, two other south Asian groups performed less well and black Caribbean students, particularly boys, performed very poorly. This last group has been the greatest focus of concern in recent years, because low achievement in young males is associated with unemployment, antisocial behaviour and crime.

The relative positions of these groups have changed little since the Swann Report (1985) expressed concerns about male pupils of West Indian origin. Then, Bangladeshi pupils obtained the worst results, comparing badly with West Indians, a situation that has now changed. African-Asians performed exceptionally well.

## How easy is it to compare groups?

The issue is complicated by social-class factors. Children of African-Asian backgrounds generally have middle-class, educated parents who enjoyed professional status in Africa before migrating. West Indian parents are more likely to be unemployed, so their children suffer from working-class disadvantage. Statistics that hold class constant, for example by comparing attainments of black and white children of middle-class parents, show much smaller differences between the attainments of ethnic groups.

Other factors complicate the picture, as shown by Task 4.1.

### Task 4.1



Read the following data, then answer the question that follows.

The Institute for Social and Economic Research's Labour Force Survey, published in 1995, found the following:

Members of all minority ethnic groups were more likely to stay on at school after the minimum leaving age than white teenagers. The proportion remaining in education was outstandingly high among African men and women — nearly three times as many were still at college at the age of 20, compared with whites. Indians also had high staying-on rates. Among the younger members of the sample, Caribbeans were rather more likely to continue in post-16 education than their white counterparts, but the difference was small, especially for boys, and had disappeared by the age of 20. Thus, young Caribbean men were at least as likely to continue their studies as white men, but were well behind some other minority groups in this respect.

Labour Force Survey, The Institute for Social and Economic Research (1995)

**Task 4.1 (continued)**

However, comparing the qualifications achieved by those who stayed on at each stage, Caribbean men required half a year longer, on average, in the education system to achieve the same qualifications as white men. African and Indian men required an additional year and Pakistani and Bangladeshi men an additional 2 years.

How do these data present a different picture of ethnic achievement from Table 4.1?

**Guidance**

- Notice that many ethnic minorities are ambitious to improve on the qualifications they achieved at 16.
- Qualifications obtained earlier or later than average are not shown in league tables.

Obtaining qualifications later than average may lose several years of earning power and make it harder to climb the occupational ladder. Do all ethnic groups eventually obtain similar qualifications? Box 4.1 shows how different groups have fared in achieving degrees.

**Box 4.1****Higher qualifications by ethnic group**

- In 2004, people from the Bangladeshi, black Caribbean and Pakistani groups were less likely than white British people to have a degree or equivalent.
- Among men, Bangladeshis and black Caribbeans were the least likely to have a degree (11% for each group).
- Among women, Bangladeshis and Pakistanis were the least likely to have a degree (5% and 10% respectively).
- The groups most likely to have degrees were Chinese (31%), Indian (25%) and white Irish (24%). These compared with 17% of white British people.

Source: adapted from National Statistics Online

The figures given in Box 4.1 include young people recently educated in British schools and colleges and older people, many of whom will have grown up abroad. The qualifications of those educated overseas tell us nothing about the success of our school system, but they are a useful indicator of the extent to which these adults may be able to help their school-age children, both academically and financially. The correlation with GCSE results is striking.



# Why do some ethnic minorities underperform?

The types of explanation suggested for underperformance by some ethnic minorities have changed recently. Early studies tended to focus on psychological, cultural and material factors relating to the ethnic groups themselves. Many of these can loosely be called home factors. Some people felt that as ethnic minorities began to assimilate to life in Britain, their results would improve.

David Gillborn (1990) is one of several sociologists who have advocated a change of emphasis.

Educationists speak of the underachievement of Afro-Caribbean pupils rather than the underachievement of the educational system.

D. Gillborn, *Race, Ethnicity and Education: Teaching and Learning in Multi-Ethnic Schools* (1990)

In his view, school factors, particularly teachers' attitudes and aspects of the school curriculum, are more crucial explanations of different achievement patterns, though home factors, such as poverty, have some influence.

We shall begin with a brief survey of earlier explanations before examining in greater detail recent research offering explanations favoured today.

## What 'home' factors have been linked with attainment?

### Innate ability

Some psychologists, for example Hans Eysenck and Arthur Jensen, claimed that American black people had lower intelligence than white people. This was later discredited as the black students tested came from more disadvantaged backgrounds than the white students. The IQ tests set by white psychologists were likely to favour members of white cultures.

### Language

Language differences may partly explain the lower educational attainments of some ethnic-minority children born abroad. Bangladeshis came to Britain relatively recently and at the time of the Swann Report were the lowest achieving group. Newly arrived black Caribbeans experienced difficulties in having their written work accepted, as their West Indian dialect (Creole) had significant

grammatical differences from standard English. Bernard Coard (1971) suggested that white teachers often thought that such children were stupid because they failed to respond correctly to instructions. Unlike recent Asian immigrants, they were treated as English speakers, yet they often could not fully understand the teacher's form of English. However, children of Indian and Chinese origin are now among the highest achieving groups, suggesting that language problems affect only recent immigrants.

There is still some concern that children whose mother tongue is not English may have relatively restricted English vocabulary. However, their experience in coping with more than one language in their daily lives may be an advantage to them when learning new ones at school.

## Family life

The Swann Report suggested that the more tightly knit Asian family structure, compared with the typical Afro-Caribbean one, might be responsible for higher levels of achievement in some Asian groups. Few women of southern Asian origin are single mothers, whereas the phenomenon is common among Afro-Caribbeans and increasingly so among whites.

Ken Pryce (1979) observed that Afro-Caribbean family life in Britain can be 'turbulent'. New Right commentators, such as Charles Murray, associate the children of never-married parents with underachievement and other forms of deviance. When mothers bring up children alone, often working as well, such children may receive inadequate parental stimulation and supervision, unless there is a support network of relatives or friends.

### Task 4.2

Think of reasons (other than the lack of parental supervision) why the children of single parents might do less well at school.

#### Guidance

- Financial considerations might provide a clue.
- Why might such families be poorer?
- How does poverty affect educational success?

Families of immigrant origin appear to be more ambitious for their children than the white working class:

- According to Andrew Pilkington (1997), they are more likely to persuade children to stay on at school beyond 16.
- Ken Pryce (1979) found most of the Afro-Caribbean parents he interviewed in Bristol were keen for their children to progress academically.



- Ghazala Bhatti (1999) found the same for Asian parents.
- John Rex and Sally Tomlinson (1979) questioned the theory that southern Asian parents are keener on education than Afro-Caribbeans, finding that 10% more of the Afro-Caribbean parents than Asian parents interviewed had recently visited their children's school.

### Task 4.3



Can you think of reasons (other than enthusiasm for education) why a higher proportion of Afro-Caribbean than Asian parents might visit their children's school?

#### Guidance

Consider the different types of work typically undertaken by these ethnic groups.

## Material factors

There is ample research demonstrating the links between low parental income and children's educational disadvantage. In Britain, unemployment rates for non-whites are generally higher than for whites. In these days of dual income families, women's unemployment rates need to be considered as well as those of men. Examine the trends in Table 4.2.

Table 4.2 UK national unemployment, 2004

Male unemployment	Percentage
Black Caribbean, black African, Bangladeshi and mixed ethnic	13–14
Pakistani	11
Chinese	10
Indian	7
White British and Irish	6
Female unemployment	Percentage
Pakistani	20
Black African and mixed ethnic	12
Black Caribbean	9
Indian	8
Chinese	7
White British and Irish	4

Bangladeshi and Pakistani women were three times more likely to be economically inactive (not seeking paid work) than white British, Irish and black Caribbean women. Most were looking after their family or home.

Which ethnic groups currently outperform whites in GCSEs, despite higher parental unemployment? This illustrates that no single factor can be held responsible for educational progress.

The relative poverty of many ethnic-minority parents means that their children are unlikely to attend independent schools, receive private tuition or have home computers. Bhatti (1999) found that, because of financial constraints, some Asian students left the education system sooner than their parents would have liked. Despite education maintenance allowances and university loans, low family income is a significant influence when contemplating post-16 education. This is particularly the case for single-income families, disproportionately affecting Afro-Caribbean children.

## What school factors have been linked with attainment?

### Ethnocentric curriculum

An ethnocentric curriculum denotes a school syllabus that reflects the dominant culture and ignores or marginalises the cultures of less influential ethnic groups. In 1971, Bernard Coard observed the absence of black literature, history and music in the British curriculum, and of positive images of black people in school books. He felt that this and the many negative associations of the word 'black' in the English language were likely to induce low self-esteem in Afro-Caribbean children and give them the feeling that school subjects had little relevance to their lives. The multicultural education movement attempted to address this by encouraging the teaching of world religions and the inclusion of black and Asian writers on literature syllabuses. However, since 1988, the national curriculum has reversed the trend by prescribing a large proportion of Christian teaching and the study of Shakespeare and pre-twentieth century authors.

Ethnic-minority groups have addressed this problem by setting up Saturday and supplementary schools to teach aspects of their own cultural heritage. Afro-Caribbeans in Slough organise additional weekend schooling where, as well as receiving individual help with work from mainstream school, students learn about West Indian and African culture and history. According to the organisers, the children's self-esteem, as well as their ability to cope academically, is boosted and the black teachers employed there provide useful role models of professional success. These ventures do not always receive government funding.



## Overt racism

In 2000, the British Crime Survey found that 60% of Asian adults were worried about racially motivated attacks. This fear can also affect school attendance. Gillborn (1990) found that, at the comprehensive school he researched, racist name-calling by white students within school was an almost daily experience for Asian students. Physical attacks were also common and teachers responded inadequately. Several high-profile cases, such as the murder of Ahmed Iqbal Ullah, a 13-year-old Bangladeshi, in a Manchester school playground in 1986, indicate that this can be a serious problem. Asian students may respond to the threat by banding together for mutual protection, leading to accusations of keeping to themselves.

Ethnic-minority parents are less likely than white, middle-class parents to send their children to a better school some distance from home. Their local school tends to be preferred because it is in a familiar neighbourhood, perhaps making racial harassment less likely. They may also lack sufficient experience of the British education system to recognise the best-quality schools.

## Institutional racism

Unlike the racism resulting from the prejudices of individuals, institutional racism is defined by the Commission for Racial Equality as the workings of organisations, rules and practices that have the effect of discriminating against particular ethnic groups.

Bernard Coard (1971) accused teachers of underestimating the abilities of Afro-Caribbeans, sending a high proportion to special schools and placing them in CSE rather than O-level streams. Before 1988, when league tables began to pressurise schools to obtain optimum results, there was evidence of teachers directing black students into sports and steel bands rather than academic study.

The Swann Report (1985) condemned the separate education in language centres of southern Asian children whose grasp of English was poor. The aim was to boost the English skills of new immigrants in about a year of intensive study, so that they could cope better in mainstream schools. However, separate education in small centres meant that they were denied access to the full range of educational facilities available to other students. This example shows that good intentions in education may produce negative effects.

More recently, Gillborn and Youdell (2000) noted that a disproportionate number of black students in the schools they studied were entered for foundation tiers in GCSEs, meaning that they could only achieve, at best, C grades. Therefore, they would be unlikely to progress to A-levels. The decisions

about entering students for GCSEs were based on teachers' estimates of the students' ability and might have been influenced by stereotyping, such as the view that Afro-Caribbean boys are anti-school. Further details are given in Box 4.2.

#### Box 4.2

A consistent finding, in both the US and the UK, is that where education systems use some form of internal differentiation (through tracking, setting, banding, streaming), black pupils are usually overrepresented in the lower status groups. These groups typically receive poorer resources and are often taught by less experienced (and/or less successful) teachers. Of course, these lower ranked groups are not overtly determined on the basis of ethnic origin — they are usually presented as a reflection of the pupils' capabilities, that is, their 'ability'. But...we should be incredibly cautious and critical whenever we are told that certain pupils (disproportionately black pupils) are less able, less well developed, or whatever is the preferred phrase of the moment to describe those pupils who have been deemed to be outside the chosen ranks of those destined to succeed. We need this caution because, despite the façade of value-neutral standardised testing and teachers' 'professional judgement', in school the word 'ability' is very often another word for what teachers think/assume children can do...Even leading researchers in intelligence testing...now agree that tests cannot measure innate potential.

D. Gillborn, 'It takes a nation of millions (and a particular kind of education system) to hold us back', in Richardson, B. (ed.) *Tell it Like it is: How our Schools Fail Black Children* (2005)

## Recent opinion: teacher attitudes and student responses

Recent research has attributed attainment differences between ethnic groups to variations in teacher attitudes to different groups, combined with student responses to apparently unfair treatment. This is primarily a school factor as it involves classroom interaction. However, teachers may be responding to media stereotypes of black youths as criminals, 'gangsta rappers' or at least a 'problem', and young people sometimes reinforce this by celebrating street styles in school. In addition, the unemployment and discrimination suffered by some groups inevitably affect their attitudes to education. The studies that follow show that attempting to categorise influences into home and school factors is scarcely feasible.



## Cecile Wright: 'them and us'

Cecile Wright interviewed teachers and groups of Year 10 students in two Midland comprehensives in 1986. Both schools had previously been grammar schools and older teachers tended to associate the more challenging teaching conditions with the influx of high proportions of ethnic-minority students. One said that 'English culture is being swamped'. Staffroom comments about Afro-Caribbean students as troublemakers meant that new teachers met them with stereotypes already formed and tended to punish them more harshly than white students for similar behaviour. Some teachers made insensitive jokes that black pupils found disrespectful. In response to this 'hassle', students formed anti-school subcultures. A student told Wright, 'If the teachers have no respect for you, there's no way I'm going to respect them'.

In one school, 'gangs' of black boys asserted themselves by speaking patois, which made the teachers feel threatened and resulted in a 'them-and-us' atmosphere.

Wright concluded:

If pupils discern a repeated pattern of injustice, discontent may well become general among the pupils affected and come to have a lowering effect on the whole life and work of the school.

*Education for Some* (1986)

Use Task 4.4 to assess Foster's criticisms of Wright's study.



Professor Cecile Wright

### Task 4.4

Read the passage and answer the questions that follow.

In 1991, Peter Foster published an article entitled 'Case not proven', challenging the validity of Wright's study of teacher racism in two schools. He pointed out that Wright provided no first-hand evidence of teacher racism. She simply quoted

**Task 4.4 (continued)**

the results of interviews with a small number of teachers and students, who may not have been a representative sample. Although in her interviews several students said that some teachers took 'a real interest' in them and 'it's just certain teachers who are racist', Wright did not pursue these points. As a black researcher, she had an agenda — to reveal teacher racism and the resulting alienation of black pupils, which lowered achievement. The teachers interviewed gave few instances to support their generalisations and may have been influenced by their perception of the interviewer as an Afro-Caribbean woman. One teacher, who said that black students were treated fairly in her school, was regarded by Wright as inaccurate. Foster concludes that there is insufficient evidence of teacher racism to regard it as the main reason for underachievement. Rather, we should look to 'economic, social and cultural disadvantages'.

According to Foster, what criticisms could be made of:

- Wright's sample?
- her selectivity when interviewing?
- the teachers' evidence?
- how interviewer effect may have operated?

If Wright had been a white researcher, would this have solved the problems of bias and having an agenda?

**Guidance**

- Samples need to be large and carefully selected in order to reflect a typical range of opinions.
- Interviewers should avoid directing respondents towards certain responses, yet they need to probe enough to gain detailed evidence.
- Inevitably, the characteristics of the interviewer may influence the responses obtained.

## Mairtin Mac an Ghail: problems of researcher identity

In contrast to Wright, Mairtin Mac an Ghail, an Irish sociologist, described in *Beyond the White Norm* (1989) his own early research into education and ethnicity as being too much from a white standpoint:

When I began to examine the schooling of black young people, I did not initially report their view of things.

M. Mac an Ghail, *Beyond the White Norm* (1989)



He criticised other researchers for their ‘culturalist perspective’, adopting the ‘white norm’ of viewing the black community as a ‘problem’. An example is to contrast the ‘pathological’ Afro-Caribbean family structure with the assumed unity of the Asian extended-family network.

For his study at ‘Kilby School’, Mac an Ghaill used the black sociologist Paul Gilroy, a ‘soul head’, as a ‘gatekeeper’ to help him gain an insider view of Afro-Caribbean youths’ informal social divisions into funk heads, soul heads and Rasta heads. Mac an Ghaill taught at the school, observed other teachers and interviewed teachers, students and their parents. He opened his house to students in their leisure time to deepen his insight into their experiences. He concluded that, while well-meaning teachers thought that they treated all students the same, ethnic-minority students received unfair treatment, which led to resentment. Adding to their general awareness of racial and social-class disadvantages outside school, this led some Afro-Caribbean and Asian males to form anti-school subcultures. Such behaviour boosted their morale but was damaging to their school progress.

In contrast, a group he called the ‘black sisters’ resented the white bias of the school history curriculum but accommodated to it in order to succeed, ‘so that we can tell them that black people are not stupid’. Students described Mac an Ghaill as ‘Irish, not white’, which helped him to be accepted. However, there were some topics that the black sisters probably kept from him. One of them said:

You can’t really know what it’s like for a black woman. That’s why I think that although what you have done is good, I think that black women should carry out their own studies.

Quoted in M. Mac an Ghaill, *Beyond the White Norm* (1989)

## David Gillborn: avoiding confrontations

Gillborn’s observations (1990) over 2 years at ‘City Road’ comprehensive confirm the views of Wright and Mac an Ghaill that secondary-school age Afro-Caribbean boys may be viewed as a threat to teachers’ authority. He found that they were reprimanded far more than white or Asian students for the same offence — for example, being singled out for chatting in class when most pupils were doing so. In addition, Gillborn used a quantitative method of comparing reasons why students of different ethnic groups were entered in the school’s detention books. He found that while pupils of other ethnicities were more often punished for breaking school rules, a disproportionate number of Afro-Caribbean students had received detentions for ‘offences whose identification rested primarily in the teachers’ interpretation of pupil attitude or intent’. Their

behaviour was frequently viewed as a challenge to authority, even though no regulation had been broken.

White teachers often tried to repress Caribbean cultural differences, such as features of dress and speech, reading them as strategies of resistance. This control extended even to behaviour with no bearing on educational progress — for example, boys were reprimanded for a particular style of walking. In contrast, the cultural differences exhibited by Asians were not perceived as threatening. They were treated in the classroom with the same discipline as white students, so were often able to fulfil their potential.

Gillborn paid close attention to the interaction of particular individuals with teachers. The most common response of Afro-Caribbean boys to continued unfair treatment was to be drawn together in increasing opposition to the school. In the resulting anti-school subcultures, 'clique members revelled in their ethnicity and physical prowess, and would respond angrily to occasions where they felt themselves to be treated unfairly'.

Such confrontations sometimes led to expulsion. More often, badly behaved students were contained in small groups not destined for examinations.

Unfortunately, the high rate of Afro-Caribbean expulsions was not confined to 'City Road' comprehensive; the UK government is now so concerned, that schools have to record the ethnicity of every student they expel. The problem is outlined in Box 4.3.

#### Box 4.3

##### School exclusions

In England in 2003–04, pupils from black Caribbean, other black and mixed white and black Caribbean groups were among the most likely to be permanently excluded from schools. Black Caribbean rates were 41 per 10 000 — almost three times the rate for white pupils (14 per 10 000). Chinese and Indian pupils had the lowest exclusion rates (2 or less per 10 000).

Source: National Statistics Online

Gillborn did track a few highly motivated black students who, in contrast to the rebels at 'City Road', did all they could to avoid confrontations with teachers, apologising even when scarcely at fault. This was the case with the student Paul Dixon, which is described in Box 4.4

Gillborn's detailed ethnographic study demonstrates empathy for ethnic minority students; they were willing to confide in him despite his identity as a white researcher.



## Box 4.4

## Paul Dixon

Paul did not emphasise his ethnicity through any displays of dress or demeanour, for instance, in styles of walking or speech...Paul distanced himself not only from certain members of staff but also from some of his closest friends within the school...Paul Dixon recognised and rejected the negative image that some staff held of him. Rather than reacting through a glorification of that image within a culture of resistance, however, Paul channelled his energies into succeeding against the odds by avoiding trouble when he could and minimising the conflicts which he experienced with his teachers ...Paul Dixon's case illustrated the very great demands which academically ambitious Afro-Caribbean pupils must meet if they are to succeed despite teacher ethnocentrism: 'mere' ability and dedication to hard work are not enough, they must also adapt to their disadvantaged position in such a way that they do not reinforce the widespread belief that they represent a threat to the teachers' authority.

Adapted from D. Gillborn, *Race, Ethnicity and Education: Teaching and Learning in Multi-Ethnic Schools* (1990)

## Tony Sewell: black teachers' responses

Black sociologist Tony Sewell claimed that being older but of the same ethnic background as the Afro-Caribbean boys he studied gave him 'critical distance' but 'affinity'. In *Black Masculinities and Schooling: How Black Boys Survive Modern Schooling* (1997), he wrote about a preliminary study that he conducted at the co-educational comprehensive 'John Caxton School' in an area of high unemployment. Afro-Caribbean boys made up one-third of the school population but 85% of the exclusions. Although teachers saw themselves as progressive and were not racist in the usual sense, they displayed more control and negative criticism of Afro-Caribbean boys. They tended to explain problems of interaction in terms of the boys' subcultural background and home, rather than identifying any fault within the school or with individual teachers. Even black teachers blamed black youth culture as a disruptive force in the school.

Some black students, ambitious for success, distanced themselves from the anti-school subculture by adopting a raceless persona, avoiding street fashions and befriending students from other cultures, which earned them the label 'battymen' (homosexuals). Nevertheless, they were still disproportionately excluded by the school, their actions being misinterpreted and punished more harshly than those of white students. These black students paid the high price of peer-group hostility, without avoiding negative discipline from teachers.

### Task 4.5

- Compare Sewell's comment about his 'critical distance' but 'affinity' with Foster's comments on Wright's study and Mac an Ghaill's assessment of his own research position. Why is researcher identity such a problem for this topic?
- Could similar problems arise for sociologists studying class or gender?
- What do Gillborn's case study of Paul Dixon and Sewell's references to black students with a 'raceless persona' have in common?
- When you have read Chapter 5, consider these studies from the perspective of labelling.

#### Guidance

Consult textbooks about research methods to clarify concepts such as interviewer effect, interviewer bias and value freedom.

After his time at John Caxton School, Sewell made a detailed ethnographic study of 'Township School', a boys' comprehensive with about one-third Afro-Caribbean students. He conducted semi-structured interviews with teachers and students individually and in groups, and carried out daily observations in the playground and common rooms, 'chilling out' with the students.

Most teachers at Township were preoccupied with their own survival in a challenging school and they emphasised the need to control the students and exclude troublemakers. Even though there was evidence of unfairness and over-reaction by some teachers, few considered that their own practice involved racist stereotyping, a situation that increased student disaffection. Some teachers feared the large physique of Afro-Caribbean students. They tended to blame a lack of responsible fathering for perceived bad behaviour by black students.

While uninterested white students truanted from school and had, on average, achieved worse examination results, reluctant black students still attended, because they were more likely to be stopped by the police if found on the streets. This meant that a higher proportion of disaffected black students had confrontations with teachers.

Sewell acknowledged that many black students were rebels. He related their behaviour to Merton's strain theory (1938). Afro-Caribbeans shared other students' goals of success but felt unlikely to achieve them by legitimate means because the odds were stacked against them. This led to deviant responses.

Other boys accepted the need for education, emphasised by ambitious Caribbean parents, yet rejected the day-to-day discipline of school and were in frequent confrontations with staff. They were torn between the pro-education



values of their parents and the macho subculture that regarded education as feminised.

Unexpectedly, the fact that the headmaster of the school was black seemed to make matters worse. His main mission was to produce respectable-looking black students who would be acceptable to the labour market, so he had strict rules against black hairstyles with patterns, yet tolerated white-youth styles such as ponytails. As a result, black students were more often excluded for flouting school rules.

Older teachers from the Caribbean may have a traditional hard-work ethic and an intense dislike of current British black street culture. Increasing the proportion of black teachers is not an easy solution.

## Why is researching ethnicity and education difficult?

The research above demonstrates that linking ethnicity and educational attainment is complex because:

- so many ethnic groups are involved
- class and gender differences complicate attempts to interpret statistics
- patterns of school achievement are misleading for groups that acquire qualifications later in life
- many different home, school and cultural factors interact
- the ethnicity and other characteristics of researchers may affect their conclusions
- findings in this ethically sensitive area may be influenced by political correctness

Current thinking tends to focus on teacher–pupil interaction as one of the main reasons for differences in attainment between groups, with home factors, such as poverty, also playing a significant part.

## Summary

- Results in school examinations differ dramatically between ethnic groups, although there is some closing of the gap through post-school courses.
- Language differences, family structures and parental poverty are among the home factors that some sociologists consider responsible for the poorer school results of some ethnic groups.

- School factors include the ethnocentric curriculum, overt racism and institutional racism.
- Recent studies suggest that even well-meaning teachers may be influenced by stereotypes of disruptive Afro-Caribbean and diligent Asian students and consequently treat them differently. This often leads to confrontations with Afro-Caribbeans, the formation of anti-school subcultures and a disproportionately high rate of expulsions.
- Research in this area is complicated by other factors, such as class and gender, and the ethnic identity of the researcher.

### Task 4.6



Assess the view that differences in educational achievement between ethnic groups are primarily the result of discrimination in schools. (20 marks)

#### Guidance

##### Knowledge and application

Research the different types of discrimination before you begin this essay, and seek studies as examples.

- **Prejudice** is a learned bias for or against members of particular groups, whereas discrimination is action based on such an attitude.
- **Discrimination** is usually used to denote unfavourable treatment of people assigned to a particular category:
  - **Direct discrimination** involves deliberately treating groups differently — for example, by the overt racism of taunts and attacks or the sometimes well-intentioned establishment of different schools for different ethnic groups.
  - **Indirect discrimination** may be unintentional. Imposing a school uniform that does not allow turbans or arranging a field trip that clashes with, for example, an important Jewish festival makes life harder for students from some cultural backgrounds. The **ethnocentric curriculum** might also be viewed as unintentionally discriminatory.
- More difficult to categorise is the sort of behaviour Geoffrey Driver (1984) observed. Teachers did not have the 'cultural competence' to realise that West Indian pupils who looked away while being reprimanded might be doing so out of respect, not as a sign of indifference.
- **Cultural or new racism** involves holding a cluster of views about the abilities and attributes of an ethnic group, such as supposing that Asians like studying and that Afro-Caribbeans prefer macho street culture. Gillborn found evidence of this.
- **Institutional racism** involves systematic discrimination, such as frequently assigning some ethnic minorities to lower GCSE tiers.



## Task 4.6 (continued)



### Evaluation

- There is plenty of research evidence of these types of discrimination, but remember to evaluate the studies. Some might be quite dated or use methods that you could query.
- Assessment also means pointing out agreement and disagreement between different studies.
- A section of your essay should refer to the possibility that differences in educational achievement between ethnic groups might not be primarily due to discrimination but perhaps a result of poverty, family structures or other home factors. You should give some evidence in support.

### Conclusion

Finally, decide whether or not you consider discrimination to be the main cause of differences in attainment. If you think it is, you could perhaps restate the types of discrimination that you think are the most crucial. If necessary, analyse why it is difficult to reach a conclusion.

## Task 4.7



Some of the possible reasons for social-class, ethnic-minority and boys' or girls' educational underachievement are similar. Sometimes questions expect you to refer to several of these areas by asking about the attainment of 'different social groups' or students of 'different home backgrounds'.

Divide a piece of paper into three columns and list similar reasons for class, ethnic and gender disadvantage next to each other — for example, material factors and language use. Add the names of researchers to provide yourself with a really useful revision aid.

## Research suggestions

- Investigate a sample of the specifications and teaching materials at your school or college to see if they appear ethnocentric. Seek guidance from staff and the opinions of ethnic-minority students. Alternatively, visit a primary school to assess the readers in use and ask whether the children study the festivals of ethnic-minority religions.
- Interviews with ethnic-minority students about their experiences in education would be another interesting way of testing some of the theories above. Careful pre-planning of questions is needed for exploration of such a sensitive area.

- If there are supplementary schools for ethnic-minority groups in your area, you might be able to write a case study of one or two, providing that you can gain access and that you follow ethical guidelines.

## Useful websites

- National Statistics Online — click on education, and training  
[www.statistics.gov.uk/](http://www.statistics.gov.uk/)
- Article on social inequalities in education, with charts  
[www.statistics.gov.uk/downloads/theme\\_compendia/fosi2004/Education.pdf](http://www.statistics.gov.uk/downloads/theme_compendia/fosi2004/Education.pdf)
- Aiming High: Raising the Achievement of Minority Ethnic Pupils, DfES document  
[www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/local/midbins/ema/Aiming\\_High\\_Consultation\\_Doc.DOC](http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/local/midbins/ema/Aiming_High_Consultation_Doc.DOC)

## Further reading

- Gillborn, D. (1990) *Race, Ethnicity and Education: Teaching and Learning in Multi-Ethnic Schools*, Unwin Hyman.
- Richardson, B. (ed.) (2005) *Tell it Like it is: How our Schools Fail Black Children*, Bookmarks Publications and Trentham Books.