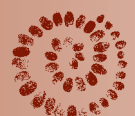
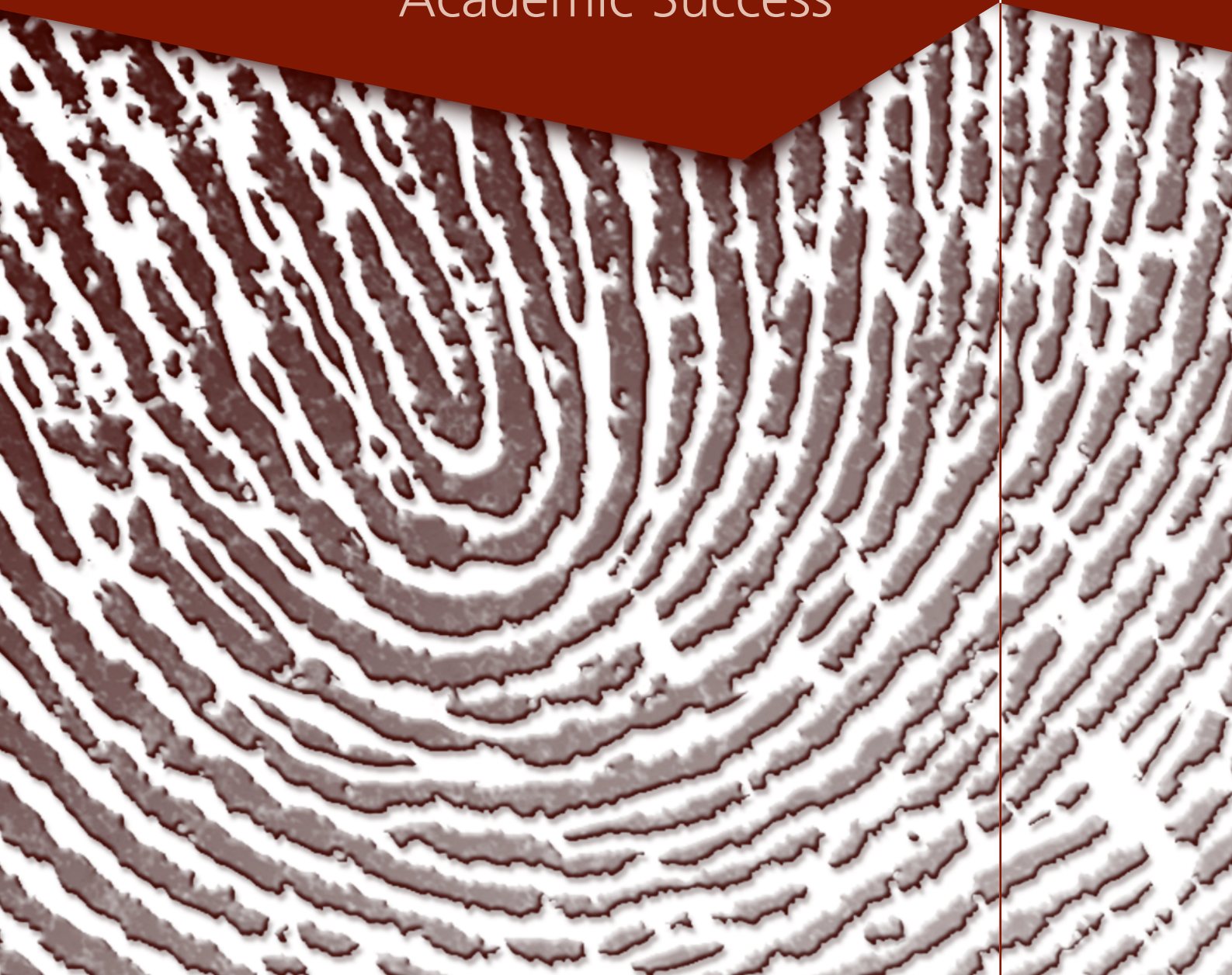


Failure by Any Other Name?

– Educational Policy
and the Continuing
Struggle for Black
Academic Success



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The Runnymede Trust is an independent policy research organization focusing on equality and justice through the promotion of a successful multi-ethnic society. Founded as a Charitable Educational Trust, Runnymede has a long track record in policy research, working in close collaboration with eminent thinkers and policymakers in the public, private and voluntary sectors. We believe that the way ahead lies in building effective partnerships, and we are continually developing these with the voluntary sector, the government, local authorities and companies in the UK and Europe. We stimulate debate and suggest forward-looking strategies in areas of public policy such as education, the criminal justice system, employment and citizenship.

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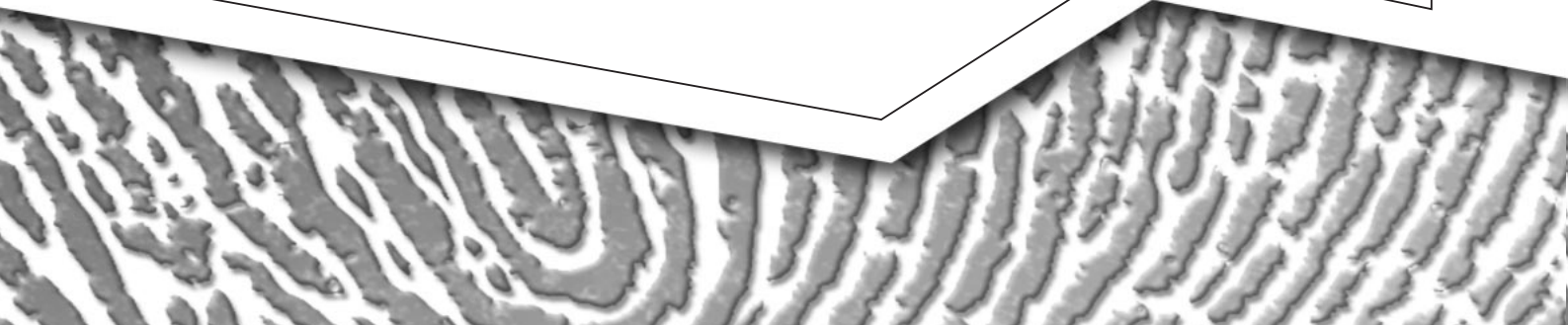
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Foreword

The educational underachievement of children from specific minority ethnic groups has concerned educationalists working in the area of race and education for well over two decades in this country. Despite the many important initiatives that have been developed both at grassroots and government departmental level, the gap in achievement between ethnic groups remains.

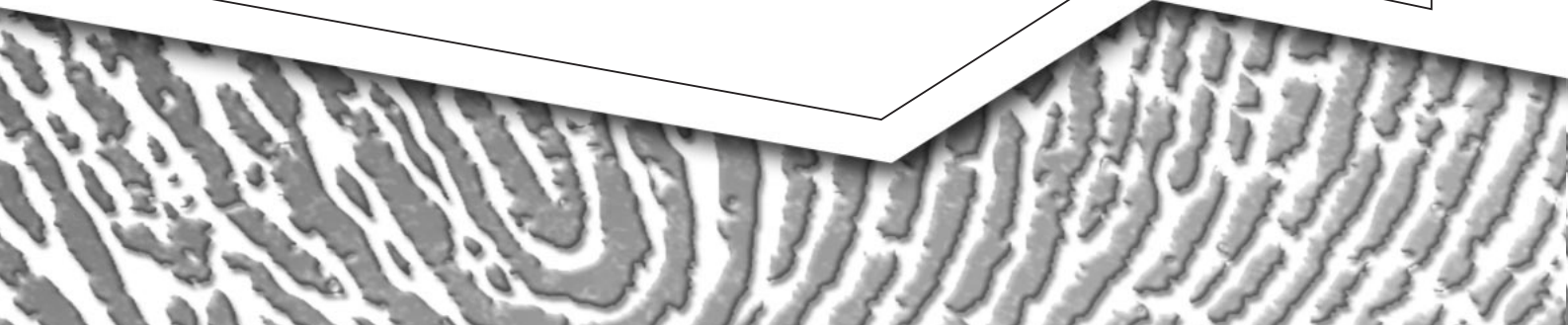
What also persists is the *nature* of the debate about race and underachievement – though the explanations proffered for minority ethnic pupil underachievement have adapted over time. Many of these explanations – low teacher expectation, high rates of school exclusion, for example – have been argued vociferously by academics and activists alike as clearly contributing to pupil underachievement, and for many years. This new *Runnymede Perspectives* paper by Dr Nicola Rollock re-focuses attention on the issue of Black pupil educational *success*. In changing the nature of the debate about race and achievement in this way, it helps to break that association between school experience and underachievement which continues to beset many pupils of minority ethnic descent.

This is not to suggest that discourses of (under)achievement are not changing. Indeed, the debate about educational underachievement has focused over recent months on the greater propensity of white male pupils from low income families to underachieve at school, noting that their risk of experiencing underachievement is roughly the same as boys of Black Caribbean heritage. Many observers – especially the media but also the Conservative Party in its focus on low income 'family breakdown' – interpret these claims as an argument for diverting attention away from minority ethnic pupil educational failure. Clearly, the debate about educational underachievement needs to reinforce the important impact of class differentials on educational outcome. However, the suggestion that we should transform the underachievement debate into a ranking of particular class or ethnic groups poses serious risks. In any hierarchy of underachievement, minority ethnic pupils are more likely to see their legitimate needs and interests ignored, a result unlikely to raise minority ethnic pupil attainment. In this paper, Dr. Rollock re-frames the debate, not by ignoring the persistent rates of underachievement among Black Caribbean pupils in UK schools, but by de-pathologizing their educational experiences.

An important finding of this paper is how definitions of success vary widely and are often contradictory for teachers. But this finding is hardly surprising, given the difficulty of trying to square the competing aims of higher overall achievement for all, but also targeting the most vulnerable students. Reducing the risk of failure, however, is unlikely to move up the agenda given the high premium placed on the achievement of high non-vocational qualifications and the clear reliance on school examination performance tables as a means of determining excellence, both by Government and by prospective parents. The increasing reliance on more educational choice as a means of improving school standards does little to enable teaching staff to move beyond the fairly restricted understanding of what educational success can mean. As the paper clearly suggests, the huge discrepancy between what young people themselves and their teachers perceive as success must be set within this context.

Being able to chart what educational success looks like for Black pupils is of immense importance. It enables any understanding of what may contribute to underachievement and highlights those strategies which facilitate success. However, that this paper has not been able to talk about success for Black children without also drawing on the ways that definitions of high achievement simultaneously exclude them, aptly illustrates the processes through which Black pupils continue to experience educational hurdles that allow the gaps in achievement between pupil groups to persist.

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November 2007



Failure by any Other name?

– Educational Policy and the Continuing Struggle for Black Academic Success

Nicola Rollock

Introduction

The persistence of lower academic attainment by Black¹ pupils in English schools is now well documented. Black pupils continue to perform well below the national average and the levels attained by their white counterparts.² While concerns about the achievements of certain white British and Muslim pupils are largely well founded,³ the longevity of debates regarding Black pupils, those contentions embedded in now historic publications and grassroots activism, must not be overlooked. Instead they should be recognized as a part of an on-going crisis: to date, no single government policy has successfully closed the gap in educational attainment, and Black pupils continue to be associated with educational disadvantage and failure.

While the negative aspects of Black pupils and education should not be ignored, it is notable that very little is known, in the UK context, about Black pupils and academic success. This paper draws on the findings of in-depth qualitative research into the experiences of academically successful Black pupils. It takes the standpoint that thinking about and exploring the experiences of Black pupils in relation to success will lend a new angle to current educational debates on their achievements, and help challenge their existing prevalent pathology.

The research considers how staff at one particular inner-city secondary school construct academic success; how these views shape their practice and the subsequent implications for Black pupils being able to achieve academically. It is argued that one of the fundamental flaws of government policy is its

failure to understand the ways in which cumulative pressures to reach targets can combine with teachers' (albeit often unintentional) subjective positioning of particular groups of pupils as a threat and anti-school, and thereby undermine any overarching commitment to raise Black pupils' educational attainment.

Structure of the Paper

This paper is organized in five sections.

- Section 1 provides a brief overview of the historical background to Black pupils in English schools and the more recent focus on achievement and academic success.
- Section 2 describes how staff and pupils at the school where the research was carried out understand the nature of academic success and the prerequisites considered important to achieving academically.
- Section 3 summarizes the findings.
- Section 4 examines how pupils are treated differently by staff depending on whether they have been positioned as academically successful, or not. Pupils' responses to this differential treatment are also examined, especially in relation to the allocation of work and the meting out of discipline.
- Section 5, the Discussion section, considers how pupils' identities and teachers' views of different groups of pupils might be best understood in the context of academic success. It goes on to suggest a new way forward in the schooling of Black pupils.

1. Background

The dire historical trajectory of Black pupils in English schools has been documented by many seminal publications. They have detailed the disproportionate number of those then termed 'West

¹ I use the generic term 'Black' throughout to refer to pupils defined as 'Black or Black British' in the 2001 Census, which includes Black Caribbean, Black African and Other Black backgrounds. In some cases, I make reference to Black Caribbean pupils in particular who have tended to be the main focus of the achievement debates. Elsewhere, I employ the terms used by particular authors.

² DfES (2005a, 2006)

³ See Rollock (2006a; 2007) for further discussion

Indian' pupils who, placed in special schools, were thereby rendered unlikely to ever return to mainstream schooling.⁴ They have traced the government's failed attempts to introduce, in the early 1960s, a national 'bussing' policy to limit the number of Black and Asian pupils in each school.⁵ And they have extensively covered what can be regarded as an ongoing concern about the lack of a culturally diverse curriculum and the perceived lower self-esteem of Black children and young people.⁶

Research has generally sought to investigate, understand and establish explanations for the differing school experiences and low qualification outcomes of Black pupils. Such research has tended to cite, on the one hand, the impact of institutional factors via, for example, low teacher expectations as they interact with processes such as setting classes by pupil 'ability'⁷ or, alternatively, the perceived lack of interest and low levels of motivation encountered among Black pupils and their families towards schooling and education overall.⁸

However, barring the major research of academically successful Black and white students that was planned in the early 1980s, and then abandoned amid fears that it may have overshadowed the more prevalent difficulties faced by Black and minority ethnic pupils,⁹ relatively little attention has been paid to educational achievement and academic success amongst Black pupils. It is only quite recently that academic and policy debates have begun to focus on this area. For example, Ofsted has attempted to offer an overview of good practice in relation to Black Caribbean pupils in primary and secondary schools¹⁰ but there is little evidence that the recommendations (listed below) have been incorporated into national policy or that they have made any significant impact on Black Caribbean attainment.

4 Coard (1971)

5 Bonnett & Carrington (2000)

6 See e.g. Taylor (1981); Tomlinson (1983); Gillborn (1999)

7 Gillborn & Youdell (2000)

8 See e.g. Sewell (2000a, b)

9 Swann (1985)

10 Ofsted (2002a, b)

11 Ofsted (2002a: 29; 2002b: 31)

12 DfES (2003)

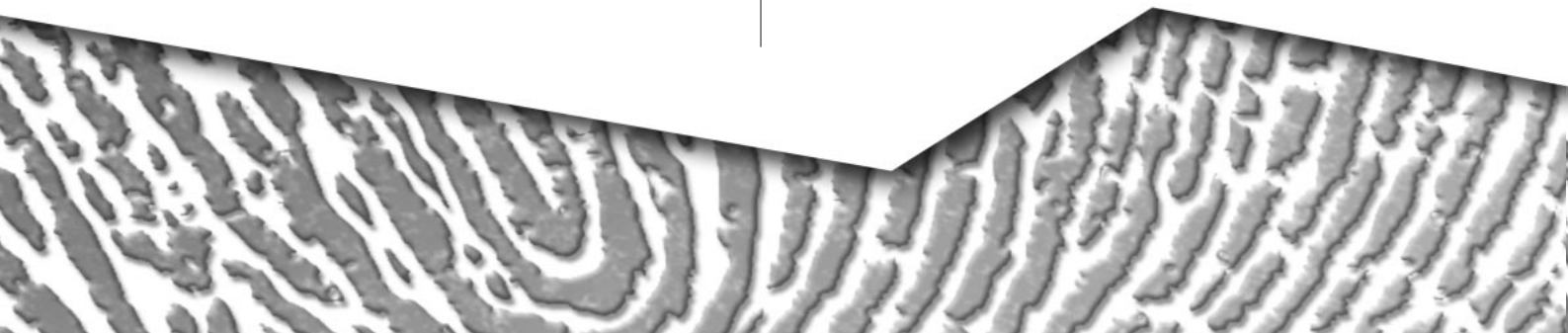
Recommendations from Ofsted reports on the Achievement of Black Caribbean pupils in primary and secondary schools¹¹

- 1 use data analysed by ethnicity to check the participation and achievement of ethnic groups
- 2 gather and debate the views of staff, pupils, parents and the wider community about barriers to achievement and responses to school
- 3 focus sharply in their response to the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000 on what can be done through the curriculum, teaching, assessment and guidance to remove barriers to achievement and to reflect ethnic and cultural diversity
- 4 set clear objectives and targets for improving participation and achievement based on a comprehensive whole-school plan and using the opportunities represented by mainstream improvement initiatives
- 5 provide access for all staff to high quality training so that the needs of minority ethnic pupils can be tackled with confidence

Through the government's *Aiming High* pilot, school leaders were encouraged to develop a whole-school approach to raising the achievement of African Caribbean pupils.¹² While the evaluation of the pilot reveals that the initiative was successful in enabling some schools, for example, to prioritize issues surrounding the achievement of African Caribbean pupils in school development plans and the professional development of school leaders and to improve parental support, such results were not consistent across all of the schools involved in the pilot.

Recommendations included: how governors, the headteacher and other members of school management should make a clear commitment to addressing race equality issues and to mainstreaming initiatives for raising African Caribbean achievement; how the headteacher should be strategic and visionary in seeking to address the needs of these pupils and should ensure accountability in the use of African Caribbean achievement and inclusion data, as well as in the fair and consistent implementation of the school's behaviour policy.¹³

A sister pilot programme, aimed at primary schools, is currently being implemented across a number of schools in England. While its effectiveness



is yet to be determined, Griffiths, Cotton & Bowbrick (2005) argue, following an evaluation of the Intensifying Support Programme aimed at providing additional support and professional development to schools who have made little progress in raising literacy and numeracy standards, that the effectiveness of any intervention is often difficult to attribute to the intervention itself, since the range of factors which affect school performance are so vast.

Academic research on the achievements of Black students is scant. Channer (1995) revealed the importance of the church and the wider community in offering educational and career support and guidance to young Black people. A similar finding is reported by Cork (2005) in her study of the ways in which parents of Black pupils gain information about and understanding of the education system from community support groups in order to better guide their children through school. Other research has examined the life histories of young Black people in higher education or of Black professionals, encouraging participants to reflect on the factors and experiences that they consider instrumental to their success.¹⁴ Such work not only highlights the fact that some Black pupils are able to achieve academically but also plays an important role in challenging dominant discourses of failure and disadvantage which surround Black children, young people and their families.¹⁵ These perspectives, along with an interest in understanding how some Black pupils are able to achieve academically, despite the continued statistics regarding their low educational attainment, form the focus of the research discussed in this paper. Specifically, the research sought to address the following questions:

- 1 How do staff and academically successful pupils' construct academic success and failure?
- 2 How do academically successful pupils understand their experience of school, and how are these experiences shaped by the ethnicity and/or gender of the pupil?
- 3 What are the implications of these findings for Black pupils achieving academically?

This paper focuses on the first and last of these questions.

¹³ Tikly et al. (2006)

¹⁴ MacDonald (2001); Rhamie & Hallam (2002)

¹⁵ Modood (1993); Osler (1999)

Methodology

This paper discusses the ways in which staff and pupils construct academic success and the strategies or processes necessary for academic improvement. It is based on a year-long in-depth case study involving semi-structured interviews with 21 school staff and 25 pupils from a range of ethnic backgrounds at a coeducational inner-city secondary school, fictitiously called Metropolitan High.

Staff included senior management within the school and Heads of subject areas as well as support staff. Pupils included academically successful boys and girls from Years 9, 10 and 11. These year groups were regarded as central to shaping an understanding of academic achievement since they represent a period in the school calendar where both staff and pupils are concerned about subject selection or are involved in study towards GCSE/GNVQ¹⁶ examinations. The school selected those pupils who had achieved, or were predicted to achieve, the highest scores in their Key Stage 3 tests.¹⁷

The interviews were substantiated by observations and records of staffroom conversation and activity, staff meetings, school assemblies and achievement evenings. Information collected on pupil exclusions, school policies and inspection reports informed the analysis of the findings and conclusions.

¹⁶ GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education) and GNVQ (General National Vocational Qualification) refers to the examinations that pupils sit during Year 11, around the age of 16 in this their final year of compulsory schooling (Department for Education and Employment - DfEE, 1996).

¹⁷ Between the ages of 5 and 16, pupils sit a series of tests as part of a process to determine whether or not they have reached specific levels of the National Curriculum (NC). These tests, called Standard Assessment Tests, and frequently referred to as SATS, take place at the end of each Key Stage. Within this period of compulsory education, the NC is divided into four key stages that represent different age spans and levels. There are eight levels of increasing difficulty and pupils are expected to reach an expected level (shown here in brackets) according to their age.

Attainment targets and levels for the National Curriculum

Year group	Reception	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
Age of pupils at end of year	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
Key Stage	KS 1			KS 2				KS 3			KS 4	
Level	1-3 (2)			2-5 (4)				3-7 (5/6)			Via National Qualifications	

The SATS taken at the end of Key Stage 2 form part of the profile which accompanies each pupil to secondary school. According to staff at Metropolitan High, these SATS are used as part of a probability calculation to generate predictions of pupils' future performance at Key Stage 3. In turn, the SATS taken at the end of Key Stage 3 are used to predict the results of Key Stage 4 examinations (traditionally GCSEs and GNVQs).

2. Understanding Academic Success

2.1 Staff definitions of academic success

School staff tended to describe academic success in terms of any level of improvement in educational performance, irrespective of the specific grades obtained, or in terms of progress in a pupil's personal development:

Academic success simplistically means the grades pupils achieve, but there are clearly other forms of success which aren't academic, which aren't recognised, personal qualities, more practical application of knowledge ...things that are outside the National Curriculum remit ...

(Head of English, female)

... you can look at it [academic success] in the very narrow sense in terms of what certificates is a child leaving school with and some people would just see that as the only sort of success. I tend to look at it more as the development of that individual while they are at school ... what we like to see is children developing their own personal potential but also in a broader sense as well, developing, helping to develop decent young people who are confident but also have a, you know, sense of community spirit; the sort of children, who are going to make nice citizens once they leave school.

(Support Staff A, female)

Such views appear to reflect a liberal, holistic ideology where the role and purpose of schooling explicitly allows for the recognition of individual pupils' needs and development. This notion of what can be termed inclusive success seems to contradict Gillborn & Youdell's argument¹⁸ of an A-to-C economy operating in schools in which teachers remain committed and constrained to achieving academic success strictly in higher-grade terms as advertised and endorsed, for example,

¹⁸ Gillborn & Youdell (2000: 43)

¹⁹ See also Davies (2000); Jewell (2007) for press coverage regarding the consequences of testing.

through school performance tables. As a result they tend to focus their time and resources almost exclusively on those pupils seen as able to achieve in these higher-grade terms.¹⁹

However, despite supporting this largely inclusive approach, staff also constructed and supported the acquisition of academic success specifically in terms of A* to C grades, as the following sets of comments by a member of staff reveal:

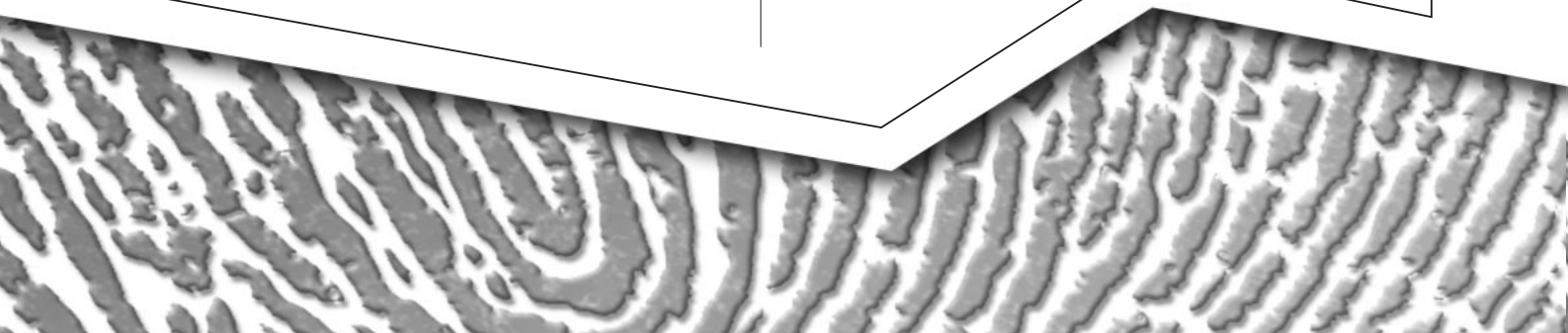
I hate this government, the previous government, they sort of say you have to have a C ... I mean if you get a D, that's hard to get. To say 'well sorry D is no good', I mean I just hate that idea, so whatever grades you get – as long as you do your best.

(Maths Teacher, male)

I put a lot of kids in this year for Maths and I said really to the previous deputy head, 'yeah', I said, 'listen, we'll call this a trawl, we'll just put 'em in. I will teach them, I'll give up all my time and we'll see what we get. Let's just see what we get because the school at the end of the day will be judged, you know, it's judged on the exam passes. So if we get some Ds well that's fine, then they know the Ds. And then we put them in again in November – we'll have another crack at it.' Well then we had a bit of argument about, 'Oh, er, we can't put them in until we're absolutely sure they're Cs.'

(Maths Teacher, male)

In the first of these two remarks the acquisition of D grades, though recognized as not being successful in government terms, is repositioned by this teacher as having legitimacy and status. However, later in the same interview, he appears to contradict this view, providing a vivid account of the strategy he sought to introduce in order to boost the number of pupils achieving higher-grade passes in Mathematics. The importance of and pressure attached to these grades – to achieving this *exclusive*, high-status success – is clearly



evoked in his recollection of the tense exchange between himself and the deputy headteacher who, unwilling to risk the possibility of pupils attaining the 'failure' of a D grade, is prepared to enter them for the examination only if they are absolutely certain to achieve at least the minimum higher-grade pass of a C. Achieving exclusive success (C grade and above), therefore, is not a straightforward case of equal opportunity for every pupil but a tense, strategic exercise of risk assessment and probability in order to enter for examination only those pupils already identified as most likely to obtain a C.

This engagement with two apparently contradictory forms of success might simply reflect a desire to appear well-meaning, liberal and inclusive (especially in light of contributing to a piece of research) while at the same time being subject to the everyday realities and pressures of the education system once behind the classroom door.²⁰ However, it was also influenced and shaped by quite fixed, uninterrogated views about the particular types of pupil who were perceived to attend Metropolitan High.

2.2 Who is academically successful?

In explaining how they arrived at their understanding of academic success, staff revealed quite a stark distinction between the type of pupil seen as capable of attaining either inclusive or exclusive terms. This was greatly influenced by views about the relationship between the school's admission policy and the types of schools by which it was surrounded:

... a lot of the children in the area are creamed by other schools erm because we still have grammar schools, call them what you will erm, you see one over there [*points through the window*] where the nice girls go? Selective, though they pretend not to be. So we don't get first pick, if we get able children, it's sort of by chance really.

(Maths Teacher, male)

²⁰ See Keddle (1971)

²¹ This refers to the minimum percentage of eligible pupils in each school who were expected by the government to attain 5 or more A* to C grades at GCSE and GNVQ.

²² See Ball (2003); also Weekes-Bernard (2007)

You will find that in every borough there are always two or three schools that always hover around the 20 percent²¹ but you've got to sort of look at the intake ... Most schools now say that they're not selective, but it is [*sic*]!

(Maths Teacher, Head of Year, male)

These comments are important for several reasons. First, they demonstrate the impact of parental choice and school admissions policies in affecting the pupil demographic of local areas and individual schools.²² Second, they reveal how academic success becomes reconstructed and legitimized directly in relation to perceptions about the profile of this demographic. This is exemplified in the first statement by the reference to 'nice girls' attending the nearby grammar school, simultaneously exposing the less agreeable nature and desirable status of any remaining girls applying to and attending Metropolitan High. Therefore, exclusive success becomes, in the view of these staff, almost impossible for pupils at Metropolitan High because they are regarded as simply not academically 'able' because of *who* they are. This was most explicitly articulated in relation to pupils with Special Educational Needs for whom achieving an 'inclusive success' was perceived as their only option:

We've got a reputation as a school that is good with children with Special Educational Needs, so some of them kids just aren't gonna get...they're just not gonna get five A to Cs but I think it's [academic success], you know, how they come out of the school, if they've got self-esteem and they feel they can go out there and get a job, depending on what level they're at.

(Physical Education Teacher, Head of Year, female)

In other words, within what can be regarded as a perversely misconstrued and contradictory inclusion agenda, the very extent to which pupils are seen as able to achieve the best grades – that is A* to Cs – depends on certain pupil characteristics, or what Bourdieu (1986) refers to as their *cultural*

capital. Rather than all pupils being perceived as equally 'special' and equally able to achieve, certain groups of pupils (here those with Special Educational Needs and girls) get 'left behind' despite a government commitment to the contrary.²³

These varying expectations are informed partially by the drive to meet targets, through which the acquisition of lower grades and personal development – neither of which is accorded much economic worth or status beyond the school gates – are reconstituted by staff as positive, desirable and acceptable as they strive to view all pupils as succeeding in something.

Pupil characteristics

Pupils who were perceived as able to achieve academically and who gained popularity amongst staff were also those who displayed a willingness to work hard, handed in homework on time and asked for help. Despite the fact that Metropolitan High was seen to attract a lower intellectual type of female pupil compared with neighbouring schools (see above), it was in fact girls who were seen as more likely to demonstrate these types of behaviours than boys, and who were therefore perceived as more predisposed to succeed academically:

... there's more pressure now to study, you have to have your coursework handed in, there's [*sic*] your deadlines, you have to study your intermediate exams. It's more like a drip effect. It is part of the reason girls are better than boys ... girls tend to be more organised, more pragmatic, they meet the deadlines, they get the work in, they hand it in, it gets marked and handed back to them...

(Maths Teacher, Head of Year, male)

... girls tend to be more motivated because they are more mature, they mature much earlier than do boys. When boys are playing their boys' games with

²³ See Gordon Brown's (2005) speech on liberty and the state.

²⁴ See also Youdell (2003)

their boys' toys, girls are thinking career, aren't they, for the most part?

(Senior Management A, female)

Simply being female, according to these members of staff, naturally and automatically affords girls their motivation, organization and focus. By contrast male pupils are viewed as deficient in all these key areas. This suggests that staff regard variations in approaches to academic work as unproblematically located within a fixed paradigm of gender difference, where merely to be female is thought to imbue girls with an inherent ready-to-work attitude and approach to schooling. In this context, staff can more readily construe female pupils as 'desirable' and ideal learners, thereby requiring less supervision and management than their male counterparts, whose masculinity renders them less capable.²⁴

Ability

References to perceived notions of 'ability' or 'potential', either in relation to classroom teaching methods or to individual pupils, were common in the context of explanations about who were the pupils considered to have the potential to achieve academically. Pupils who were able to achieve in high-grade, exclusive terms were seen to possess an innate or biological capacity for success.

There is definitely a natural ability and a natural lack of it. I mean I myself found spelling easy and I always enjoyed it but I've always found Maths difficult no matter what teachers I had or you know ... So, you know, I mean there are some children who are really blessed and seem to be, to take everything, find most subjects easy ...

(Support Staff A, female)

...you will find that there may be a child that no matter where you throw them, they will be a success, but that's just the natural ability within them ...

(Support Staff C, female)

Remaining pupils were regarded as only remotely capable of acquiring 'ability' through sheer hard work and determination:

You've got natural ability but you have also got the ability of what they can actually do if they sit there and work properly the whole time ... the students that have to work hard to achieve... We have students that do everything that they possibly could do, so at five o'clock they'll still be hanging around the school working somewhere and they're generally the ones that achieve to their potential, probably higher than we would expect them to when they come in at first ...

(Head of Maths, female)

This member of staff describes the type of acquired ability available to those who lack it naturally. Here, 'ability' is regarded as synonymous with 'potential' which, in turn, reflects what pupils are expected to attain as determined through school testing and assessment. That a pupil might achieve higher than the result predicted is seen to reflect their hard work rather than any problem with the validity and reliability of the testing process. This clearly equates any educational success or failure specifically with the extent of the pupil's input. It also reveals the unquestioning faith of staff in the tests themselves, and calls into doubt the role of the teacher who remains absent from these debates about pupil 'ability' and academic performance.

References to an innate natural ability, which some pupils possess and others lack, not only worryingly echoes Herrnstein & Murray's (1994) now generally refuted argument for a biological basis for intelligence, but implies that the lack of (exclusive) success for certain pupils is simply due to some deficit of their genetic make-up. This clearly has implications for teacher expectation of pupil achievement, the extent to which pupils may or may not be considered as beyond help, and the extent to which they are categorized as having reached some a *priori* benchmark of academic success.

Appearance

Staff were asked to consider how they understand academic success, which pupils are successful and what they might do to become more successful, focused considerable attention on pupils' appearance and demeanour and the overall attitude they demonstrated towards the school and education itself. Such views were most common amongst female members of staff who tended to unquestioningly assign importance to appearance as a specific predictor of male pupil behaviour and academic capability:

Support staff C Black female It's almost like they are more or less conforming to school, when they haven't got all that gear on, you know, they're not an individual within a school. When you look at them they are students and ... but when you got your hat on and this on, you're individual and it's individual behaviour and sometimes it can be a bit threatening and, you know, like er ... like what's depicted on the TV and about the American sort of influence and stuff. Erm, once they haven't got their Nike on, you know, their anything else on, *they become more receptive students.*

Researcher Hmm, you can feel that, yeah?

Staff Yeah, you can feel that! And I think as well within the school it feels less threatening because they are all looking like students should look.

Researcher Right.

Staff It's really strange, you know, when they've got the hat on and everything on it's almost like it's a different thing. The children that you, the students that you see here, even if they're Year 11 and they tower over you, the fact that they've got a uniform on, you can

approach them and talk to them. But if you were out, on the street with them with their hoods on and everything on, it's a different persona, you wouldn't approach them 'cos you wouldn't know what you would get back with any exchange at all. But within the school, you expect a certain level of something because they have got the uniform on and ... you know?
[emphasis added]

Alongside stricter school uniform enforcement, the headteacher had introduced various rewards for academic and extra-curricular participation, for example, in the form of the presentation of certificates at assembly and achievement evenings. Nevertheless, it is the changes in appearance *per se* that this member of support staff regards as central to the improvement in pupils' behaviour. Their having reconfigured their uniform to meet the school guidelines allows her to more easily position these boys as a manageable, faceless, homogeneous group which, she argues, their hooded tops, American-influenced attire and sheer physical presence did not previously allow her to do. In effect, this re-dressing in line with staff expectations of how a pupil *should* look, or of what Youdell²⁵ terms 'desirable learner identities' also allows this member of staff to realign herself as having control and power within the context of the traditional, hierarchical teacher-pupil relationship.²⁶

However, the importance of this analysis lies not simply in the ways in which these boys are seen as having gained legitimacy by looking like ideal pupils²⁷ but in their rejection of quite definite forms of dress that have been arbitrarily defined as a source of threat, intimidation and generally unpredictable behaviour. Further, in her assessment this member of staff fails to consider that the pupils themselves may not have necessarily

changed their behaviour, but that she, now calmed and less warily vigilant after their appropriation of a more 'suitable' appearance, has simply repositioned them as receptive. Similar strict, uninterrogated views were evidenced in the headteacher's comments about suitable forms of attire for young people growing up and being schooled in Britain:

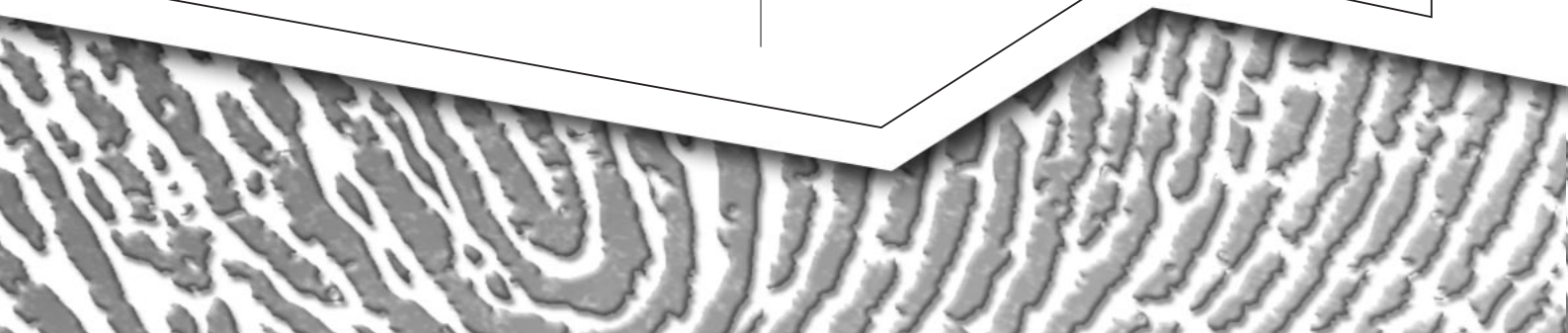
And I will say to the children 'This is not New York, we're not LA. This isn't the ghetto. It's a school.' I can say that and get away with it because I am a Black headteacher, but if a white headteacher said that then yes they would be 'oh stereotypical images' and whatever but the children know why I'm saying that and I'm saying that for their good because if I was a different head yes the boys of this school would, like in some schools, would walk around with their hoods up you know whatever. Not in this school!

Hooded tops do not form part of the uniform, so the headteacher's rejection of them within the school is understandable. However, the judgements read into these forms of clothing can be called into question. They are equated with an American subculture that is positioned as lacking legitimacy and relevance to Metropolitan High in terms of both geographical location and the perceived impoverished lack of ambition of 'the ghetto'. The headteacher's statement is saturated with both overt and implicit references to ethnicity. Directing her words to Black pupils, the headteacher uses her own ethnicity to lend (alleged) authenticity to her argument and to confirm her well-meaning and non-racist intent. This, along with the asserted dichotomy between British and American youth cultures, reflects a rather simplistic reading of identity as predictable, fixed and uniformed by classed assumptions. These symbols of academic decline – hooded tops, baseball caps and Nike clothing – comprised what staff termed 'Black street culture', and extended to include the way some Black boys walked²⁸ and the interest they took in a particular form of music:

²⁵ Youdell (2003: 15)

²⁶ See Rogers (1979); also Moore (2004)

²⁷ See Becker (1952)



I just think sort of like the music that the kids listen to; it doesn't promote education and doing well. It's all about sex and drugs and that kind of thing. There's lots of swearing and cussing and I think they, erm, kids even though they don't realise it they sort of internalise that and it does come out. In their leisure time they're either listening to hip-hop and all the sort of rap and stuff that talk about these kind of negative things...

(Head of Year, Black female)

This remark was made during a conversation about the educational achievement of Black boys and street culture. As with the unquestioned assumptions attached to appearance, here it is hip-hop being positioned as wholly negative and undesirable, and as having no status within the dominant discourse of the school and the values and lifestyles seen to be encapsulated by exclusive success. Hip-hop apparently loses any diversity in message and lyrical content, being instead committed to promoting a hedonistic lifestyle of sex, drugs and related debaucheries, all of which are seen to readily infiltrate the susceptible and gullible minds of its naïve young Black male consumer.²⁹

The singling out and relabelling of particular forms of racialized and arguably classed youth subcultures as signifiers of fear, intimidation and an anti-school mindset, mirrors a similar moral panic about the 'mods' and 'rockers' of the 1960s, described in detail by Cohen in his book *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*.³⁰ Emphasizing the historical recurrence of these 'moral panics', he describes public response to Mexican American youth during the Los Angeles riots of 1943:

References to this group were made in such a way as to strip key symbols (differences in fashion, life style and entertainment) from their favourable or neutral connotations until they came to

²⁸ This is not a new finding. Early research into the schooling experiences of Black pupils has reported that they (notably African Caribbean pupils) are frequently reprimanded because of the way they walk, talk or wear their hair. See Wright (1986); Mac an Ghaill (1988); Gillborn (1990); also Ofsted (2001); see Rollock (2006) for an overview of this literature.

²⁹ See also Rollock (2005); Osgerby (2004: 149)

³⁰ Cohen (2002)

evoke unambiguously unfavourable feeling.

Hip-hop, hooded tops and Nike clothing likewise lose any neutral or complex meaning and become simplistic correlates of a racialized and classed anti-school attitude. Yet, while hip-hop was viewed negatively by the member of staff discussed above, it was repositioned or relabelled by another as an area in which pupils could be said to achieve. In the following extract, taken from a conversation with the deputy headteacher about academic success, he has earlier rejected the 'old-fashioned idea' of academic success as 'being able to pass examinations well' and, instead, argues for the inclusion and recognition of other forms of success:

You also have other students who are very talented – especially at Metropolitan High I think they are amazingly, you know, talented kids in this school. I think that can also be considered as an academic thing, *like Music or Sports* or whatever it might be, all these things are now seen, I think, on a sort of level playing field. So it's not just '*oh you're good at Maths, you're good at English*'. I think you celebrate the whole lot. I don't think you can in any school unless it is a selective school talk, really talk, only about academic achievement because there are so many other achievements that happen and I wouldn't want to pull out the academic things from everything else that the school does ... *We've got amazingly talented athletes at this school, we have very talented rappers*. We have lots of things that the pupils do which if you don't dig deep enough you don't actually see.

(Senior Management B, white male; emphasis added)

The extracurricular talents that this member of staff insists deserve greater recognition are the same activity areas (music and sport) into which Black students historically have been encouraged, often based on stereotypical perceptions of an

innate aptitude for them. This attitude connects with a persistent concern of many Black parents, that their children have been restricted from achieving in mainstream subjects as a result of their having been channelled into lower-status extracurricular activities. The deputy head's desire to value all forms of achievement equally means that even those who are achieving in these non-traditional areas, which have little wider value beyond the school gates in terms of facilitating access to further and higher education and to high-status employment, are applauded and encouraged. In fact, such relabelling may mask the doomed celebration of an inferior form of success for Black pupils.

Family background

Staff also drew inferences about family background, home environment and their perceived relationship to pupils' academic achievement. They understandably stressed the need for parents to value education, to be able to pass on this mindset to their children, and for them to be supportive of the school and its rules and guidelines. However, as with pupils, there were particular families and lifestyles which they felt hindered academic achievement:

Why are some pupils not as academically successful? As I say parental expectation, home environment, they haven't got somewhere to work, they go home to you know a fish and chip dinner or a television. Their parents are not supportive. They don't turn up to various evenings er, you know or they will come up at times of trouble and shout the odds but they won't come up if you want to discuss the work.

(Senior Management A)

Attendance at parents' evenings was often cited as evidence of parental commitment to their child's education. Those who did not attend were immediately positioned as uninterested in their child's education with no consideration of how particular circumstances, such as working shifts,

could have made frequent attendance difficult. However, simply attending parents' evenings was not always enough commitment to merit recognition as an active parent. Parents were expected to spend the 'right' amount of time speaking with teachers – too long a conversation was thought inconsiderate of a teacher's time. In addition, there were parents who simply were not worth engaging with seriously:

You talk to them and you think 'I don't know why I'm wasting my time'. So on parents' evenings I say as little as possible because I know I am wasting my time. I go [*voice lowers, assumes insincere, pacifying tone*] 'yeah, really well done, really well done, yeah that's great. Oh no, they're doing fine.'

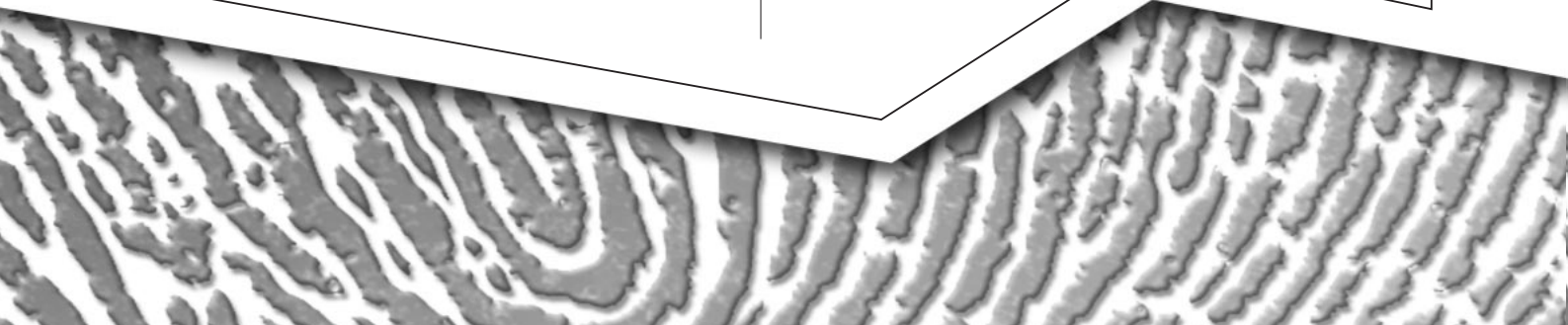
(Teacher A)

While this reflected an extreme position, it demonstrates how teachers' personal beliefs and personalities shape the schooling process. In addition to attending and acting appropriately at parents' evenings, growing up in an environment conducive to learning was, according to staff, crucial to the acquisition of academic success. Comments about the suitable home environment revealed further beliefs about the academic propensity of particular groups of pupils:

I mean obviously if you've got a stable home life, two parents, you got your own bedroom with a computer in it, you know you'll obviously find it easier than if you're from a single parent family, you've got 2 or 3 younger brothers or sisters to look after and you're helping mum cook tea. You know the two types of students are gonna be very very different when it comes to actual learning.

(Maths Teacher, Head of Year, male)

What is striking in this remark is the depiction of the families at either end of this stable–unstable dichotomy, who are seen as



representing the ideal and worst home-life scenarios. The problem with this analysis is the unquestioning way in which the teacher reads causality into the pupil's attitude to learning, sees it as stemming directly from home environment and parental status, prejudging pupils who grow up in the 'wrong' kind of environment as automatically more likely to fail, and thereby challenging the notion of high expectations for all pupils.

Social class

Pupils from middle-class backgrounds were seen to value education, know how to exercise this value appropriately and understand the concept of academic success. It was also argued that the parents in such families acted as positive role models for their children through the fact that they themselves had usually attended higher education and pursued professional careers:

Teacher B ... achievement just doesn't come through school. If you spend most of your life out of school it's the background that you grow up in that influences, er, you know, your academic achievement. A lot, er, I don't know, I can't say in percentage terms but, you know, basically kids from fairly better, more well-off, middle-class backgrounds achieve academically more than kids from difficult, you know, who live in, erm, who come from poorer families. I think there is definitely a whole set of social and economic factors which disadvantage certain groups and advantage others.

Researcher Can you give me an example ... of what you think some of those factors are?

Teacher B Well, I mean erm, social class. I think middle-class parents tend to be ... they have seen the system,

they have been through the system and the system has worked for them and they're more aware of it and I think they probably feel they are better able to support their kids through it. They know more about how the rules, how the system works. They're more familiar with the vocabulary of everything and they have had probably had more of a formal education themselves and can support their kids through it. Erm basically they know the rules and how the system works more – they're are better able to support their kids through it. They are more likely to have more money erm so I think, on average, I know people who, they probably got more time to devote to their kids. If you're not as well off you could be working all hours to try to keep the family going, you have got more stress as well, perhaps you're less patient with your kids sometimes if you're in that sort of environment. There's something in housing as well – if you're more well off you live in a bigger house, you got access to books and other facilities, you can pay for your kids to go to piano lessons and learn music and stuff like that.

Therefore, simply being from middle-class backgrounds advantages pupils in a number of ways. Their parents, for example, are more likely to understand the codes and rules to help negotiate their child through a system with which they are already familiar.³¹ Financially, too, they are able to supplement their child's learning by offering material resources, a space to study, computers, books or particular aspects of personal development, such as learning music.

2.3 Pupil definitions of academic success

In comparison to the two forms of success proposed by staff, most of the pupils across the

³¹ See also Ball (2003: 83)

three Year Groups (9, 10 and 11) tended to view academic success in terms of the acquisition of A* to C grades at GCSE:

[Academic success is] probably students who are doing well in their subjects, getting good marks, marks that are quite high, passes. In GCSE there's A, B, Cs – they're passes. And Ds, I don't think they're passes. I'm not sure about Ds...

(Year 10, white male)

I would describe it as if you get average in your GCSE which is C and then B is above average and A is really good and A* is excellent ...

(Year 10, Black Caribbean female)

Aspirations for these high grades was closely related to an understanding that they would facilitate access to higher education, a particular lifestyle and high-status jobs:

Everyone says 'when I grow up I wanna have a nice house, nice car'. If you don't have good grades you're gonna have like a mash up³² car and a little council flat or something ... You could end up working in like Mark One,³³ and they'd like probably still want people with a few grades or something.

(Year 11, Black female)

Just 2 of the 25 pupils interviewed considered that while grades were important, school should also provide a basis for personal development and self-awareness. They tended, unlike the dichotomous model of their adult counterparts, to view this as part of a singular or overarching definition of success. Academically successful pupils were quite simply regarded as those who worked hard and were focused. A small number (6 pupils) tentatively suggested that girls might be more likely to be academically successful than boys and there was

³² 'Mash up' is slang, in this context meaning ugly, old or battered.

³³ Mark One (spelled 'Mk One') is a young women's high street fashion chain selling clothes and accessories at discounted prices.

some feeling that successful pupils tended to both wear the correct school uniform and be neatly presented. For the most part, however, the interviewed pupils tended to attribute doing well at school to hard work and, as the following comments show, rejected any inferences that success was related to individual or group characteristics:

It's nothing about their gender or anything like that. It's not about; it's not [about] disability, nothing. It's not about who you are on the outside it's about who you are on the inside ...

(Year 11, Mixed heritage male)

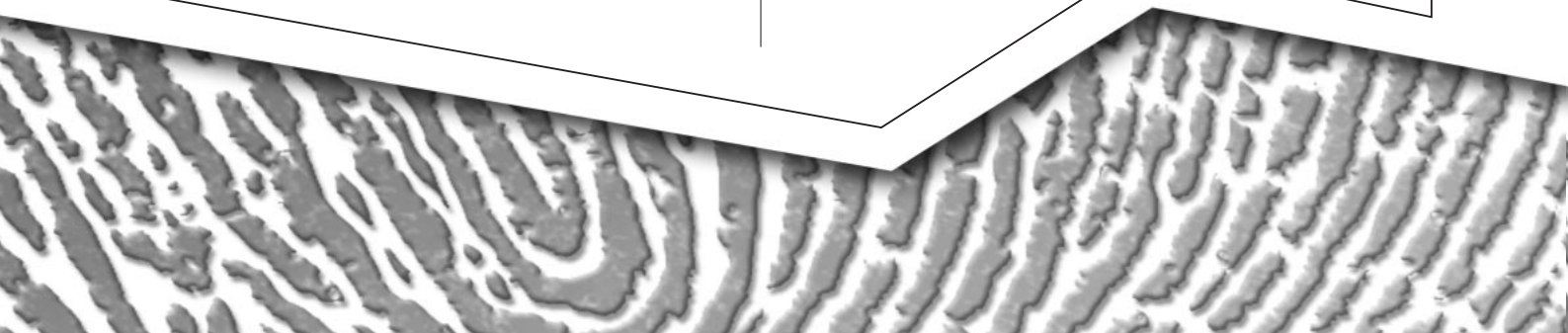
Researcher ... Cos you're saying you can be academically successful and like have your shirt out ...?

Year 11, Black African Caribbean male Hmm, you can.

Researcher So then I'm lost. Does that mean that you can not do the school rules and still be academically successful?

Pupil Yeah you can, you can. I think you can. As I said, it all boils down to your GCSEs, that's what I think and your level. It boils down to your GCSEs, what you achieve. And then you'll know how successful the person, how successful the student is.

This latter exchange highlights the discrepancy in views between the way many pupils viewed the relationship between appearance and academic performance compared to school staff discussed above. Such opposing views are clearly likely to increase the level of conflict between staff and pupils as the former seek to manage pupil appearance and the latter reject being managed.



3. Summarizing Staff and Pupil Definitions of Academic Success

The ways in which staff and pupils viewed successful and unsuccessful pupils can be summarized as shown in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1 (staff constructions) shows that female pupils from two-parent, middle-class households with few (if any) siblings, who do not display or engage with forms of Black street culture, are more likely to be considered able to achieve exclusive academic success. By contrast, male students

who engage in Black street culture, who come from lone-parent families, live in small homes and who have a number of siblings are already positioned as more likely to fail academically or, in terms of this school, as achieving an inclusive (but undoubtedly lower-status form of) success.

While pupils (Table 2) might be said to have a much smaller worldview than the adults who teach them, it is noticeable that they have fewer predetermined – and therefore more equitable – notions of who is and is not able to achieve.

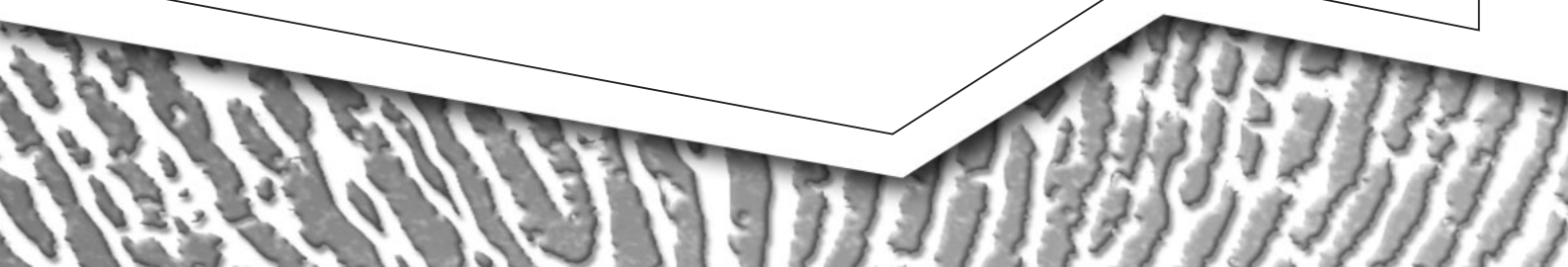
Table 1. Summary of staff constructions of successful and unsuccessful pupils

	Successful pupils	Unsuccessful pupils
Characteristics	Girls Organized Motivated Clear goals/aspirations Good conversational skills/analytical Receptive [the right level of self-esteem] [no Special Educational Needs]	Boys Disorganized [less motivated] Ineffective future planning [lack of/poor communication] [disengaged] Low or too much self-esteem Special Educational Needs
Ability	(Usually) innate	[can be acquired]
Appearance/ demeanour	Abide by school uniform rules Minimal or no obvious display of Black subcultures (dress, walk, hip hop) No strong individual identity	[disobey school rules] Influenced by 'Black student sub/street cultures' (dress, walk, hip hop) Portrayal of individuality
Social Class	Middle class (parents with 'good' jobs, educated)	Working class
Family/home environment	Dual parentage Parents value and demonstrate understanding of education Attend parents' evenings (ask the right questions) Access to books, learn instruments, computer Own room/space to work [few siblings/manageable household] [calm/organized environment]	Single parentage No/little value of education or poorly demonstrated Infrequent attendance of parents' evenings (ask wrong/too many questions) [little extended learning/poor financial acumen] [cramped living conditions] Number of young siblings Difficult/stressed circumstances

Note. Comments in square brackets denote inferences of the explicit data provided in the corresponding column.

Table 2. Academically successful pupils' constructions of academically successful pupils

	Successful students	Less successful students
Characteristics	Girls (boys) hard workers not too noisy	no specific groupings
Ability	anyone can succeed	
Appearance/ demeanour	wear correct uniform/attention to detail (girls)	



4. Differential Treatment of Successful and Unsuccessful Pupils

4.1 Staff treatment of pupils

We have looked at how staff views about the academic capabilities of pupils relate to fixed unexamined views of pupils' characteristics, lifestyle and home circumstances. In addition, we have discussed the ways in which a form of 'educational triage'³⁴ operated within Metropolitan High so that teacher time and resources are prioritized for those pupils deemed most capable of achieving in exclusive terms. Such categorization and differential treatment were exacerbated by the stressful and challenging teaching conditions that existed at Metropolitan High, along with its need to position itself as achieving in governmental terms:

Well I think there's an awful lot of pressure on schools because of league tables really and the pressure is on for them to see it more and more in the narrowest of terms, you know how many children got a certificate and how many got the magic A to Cs ... It does put more and more pressure on working with the children who are going to be the ones who get you in the league tables. I'm not saying this school ... the pressure is there for all schools but I think actually this school will always have a lot of time for maybe the less able children and bringing them along and I think we do try to do that as much as we can.

(Support Staff A, female)

I mean sometimes staff work under very stressful conditions and they probably will respond to a child who they know is focused academically who wants that extra help, who has been sort of inquiring, wanting to do something extra compared to someone who has just ended up in a fight and is disrupting the lesson.

(Head of Year Group, female)

These comments convey both the degree of tension involved in constantly striving to ensure pupils attain 'the magic A to Cs' and the way in which this, in turn, encourages a particular focus on those pupils who are likely to offer promising, high-status returns academically. In this climate of targets those pupils constructed as successful (see Table 1), and thereby contributing to the school's legitimacy and survival, are worth more investment than their less successful peers. The statement from the Head of Year also reveals the perceived linear relationship between academic performance and behaviour, with those 'focused academic' pupils construed as well-behaved and, by implication, the less academic pupils as poorly behaved. Therefore, to be defined as academically successful readily imbues pupils with a range of additional, favourable attributes and principles:

Say one of those [academically successful] pupils got involved in a situation then from the very onset you would trust that student, you would trust what they say – so to trust your pupils is a big thing and that trust extends to if there is a piece of work that they need to do in the library with some students you would say, 'Yeah fine, you got to be in the library? See you in fifteen minutes.' To other students you would say 'sorry, no you stay in here'. So they are treated differently. Often it can be, say, if you got a rowdy boy who is disruptive in the lesson, when his hand goes up for help, sometimes it is very difficult to go and help him but then the person that's sat across the room if they are on task, hard-working it is a pleasure to go and help them and spend five minutes talking with them, you know, it comes down to your relationships at the end of the day but is based around who do you trust or who don't you trust and do you actually enjoy spending time with that person because you can have a conversation or when you speak to most students it ends up in confrontation. So you shouldn't have favourites but sometimes it's hard not to.

(Maths Teacher, Head of Year, male)

34 Gillborn & Youdell (2000)

Being positioned as unsuccessful, therefore, leads to an increased probability of being disadvantaged even before – ‘from the very onset’ – the full facts have been gleaned. So while the ‘rowdy boy’ in the above example is eventually able to settle enough to engage in his work the mere fact that he was disruptive in the first place is enough to deter his teacher from even offering him help with his work. While such perceptions about unsuccessful/poorly-behaved pupils serve therefore to restrict their chances of success, the perceptions held about successful/well-behaved pupils tend to facilitate the probability of their success:

The system is set up for academically able kids so they are more likely to do well aren't they? So to the students they're gonna say 'well done, you've done this well'. They are going to get more praise. The system is that, you know, *these are the rules and they're the kids who can follow those rules, so they're gonna get the praise*. We deal with, we do reward and praise effort as well, er, but then that is something we have to make a conscious effort to do, you see what I mean? If you just go along with the system then the academically able kids get the rewards and the praise, the grades, but you have to make a conscious effort to praise the kids who put a lot of effort in because the system isn't built up to recognise effort as much.

(Teacher B, white male; emphasis added)

This comment clearly exemplifies the theory presented by Bourdieu when he argues that pupils whose disposition or profile most closely matches the values of the school, or who are regarded as having legitimacy within the context of the rules and norms of the school (see descriptions in the left-hand column of Table 1), are most likely to be rewarded and to achieve academically.³⁵

4.2 Pupils' views of how staff treat them

These differences in treatment did not go unnoticed by pupils, who perceived that their academically successful status affected not just the

type of work they were given but the meting out of discipline and general fair treatment. They tended to draw comparisons with the treatment of less successful pupils who, they considered, fared worse in all areas.

Class work

Classes that were set by pupil ability provided an obvious example of an arena where teachers differentiated between pupils.

In our class, we're supposed to be the higher class but we are different people on different levels of work: some are on higher, some intermediate and some are foundation. So he tends to spend more time with the higher people, which I see he like spends more time explaining to them and with the foundation people he just like tells them to do stuff – look in the book and they just do it.

(Year 11, Other Black Background, female)

Despite being considered academically successful and part of the (higher) extension group, this pupil remains aware of further subdivisions that exist within this class and the way in which this informs the teacher's behaviour towards different groups. 'Higher people' are seen to receive a richer, more meaningful level of interaction, with opportunities provided to discuss their work and understand it fully. By comparison, pupils set lower-level (foundation) work simply receive directives, with the teacher appearing to lack any real concern for their progress and understanding. That such a noticeable difference in treatment exists *within* the extension group suggests that the treatment of those in the lower, separate (core) group must be even starker. Indeed, pupils in these lower sets were reported to feel disheartened and lack the motivation to work since they felt there was a limit on the final grade they could achieve in the examination:

[Teacher] says some pupils come to her saying why do they bother when [they are] put in Foundation groups if they're going to fail anyway. [They] can't be put

³⁵ See Grenfell & James (1998: 21)

in Core/Intermediate group because if [they] fail, [they] will get a U. [It is] better to get some grade than no grade.³⁶
(Head of Subject Area, female)

... sometimes when I talk to them and they say, 'Oh well I'm in the low, the dunce group or the low group'. And I say, 'What does that mean? What do you mean by that?' 'Oh the most you can get is a D.'
(Support Staff C, female)

In addition to highlighting the despondency of pupils in lower groups which are set by ability, the former teacher also points to the continued risk evaluation and probability calculations involved in ensuring pupils receive certain grades. While pupils want at least the opportunity to get better grades, by being placed in a higher group, this in fact is seen to represent too great a risk for the school. If the pupils fail they will receive a U (unclassified) mark rather than achieving at least 'some grade' in the lowest group,³⁷ which is regarded as a more favourable option for the school and the pupils themselves. Worryingly, such complexities and concern with the experiences of pupils in these lower groups tend not to be addressed in the policy commitments of either the Labour or Conservative parties, where they promise increased grouping and setting by ability.³⁸

While some of the academically successful pupils interviewed felt they received more teacher attention and support with their work and encouragement than their less successful peers, others were of the opinion that their successful status meant they were regarded as capable of working independently:

I think teachers tend to encourage you much more. Like they tell you 'you can do it' or they have more faith in you and they tend to say it to you but not up front just like ... sometimes they even

³⁶ Fieldnotes.

³⁷ The percentage of pupils receiving 'ungraded' or 'no pass' results is also recorded in the performance tables alongside the schools A* to C and A* to G percentage achievements, which may be a further incentive for Metropolitan High to ensure that pupils gain definite graded results even if they do not fall within the A* to C grade category – a complex game of risk and probability.

³⁸ e.g. DfES (2005b); Cameron (2006)

give you more time or less time because they know you can get on with it. They give you more time because they want to help you more, like to get ahead. I think they do act differently towards academically successful pupils ... Some teachers tend to help more 'cos they feel like those pupils are going to succeed ... At the same time they might not help those people who are succeeding because they know they can get on with the work ...

(Year 11, Other Black Background, female)

Pupils felt that academically successful pupils were considered easier to work with and more likely to benefit from teacher input. In contrast, pupils felt that teachers regarded their less successful peers as requiring a great deal of time and help, at the end of which success was not guaranteed. This was compounded, in their view, by the fact that staff regarded and treated less academic peers as ignorant and unable to grasp concepts quickly:

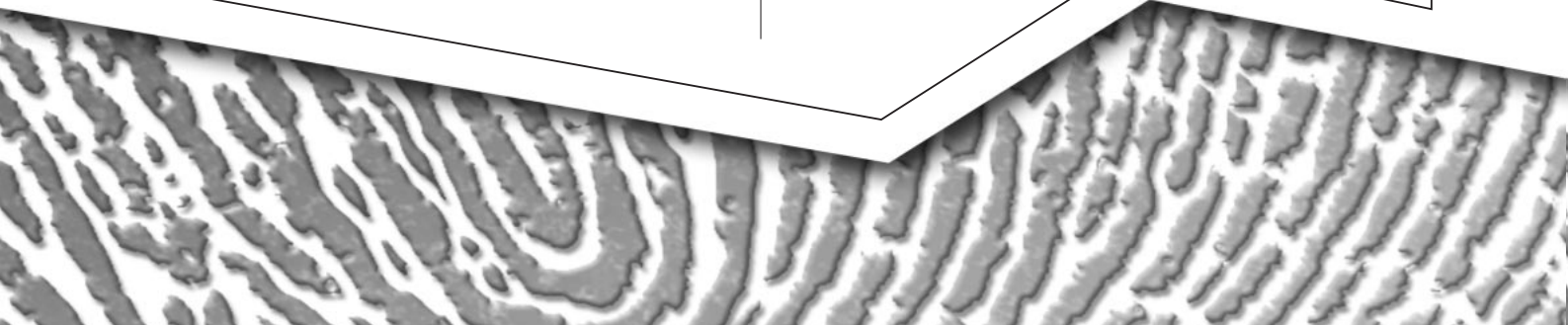
The people in the foundation class for Maths, they told me that their teacher was like patronising him. He was like [*assumes deeper tone*] 'do you know what a calculator is?' Or things like that, sarcastic comments like that or 'Do you know what to do with it?' Stuff like that. Things that you should know, that he knows and he asks do you know about that. It makes you feel stupid.

(Year 11, Other Black Background, female)

Pupils positioned as less successful were therefore treated as inferiors in relation to the type of work they were given, the quality of teacher interaction they received but also, as already evidenced in the staff comments above, in the level of understanding they were granted.

Discipline

According to pupil reports (and as shown earlier), teachers tended to be less suspicious and more



lenient about the motives or behaviour of successful pupils, a generosity not offered to their less successful peers:

Like if somebody [who] is not successful, erm, does not do their homework they get in trouble but the good person doesn't do their homework it's like, 'oh you can bring it in tomorrow'.
(Year 10, Black Caribbean, female)

Implicit in granting academically successful students extra time to complete their work is a belief that they have genuine reasons for not handing it in. A similar judgement is not accorded to the less successful student, who is assumed to be making excuses and is subsequently punished. Different sets of assumptions prevail for the pupils depending on their profile or the extent to which they are seen to have legitimacy within the school. The judgement that they possess additional desirable qualities also often means successful pupils escape minor reprimands in the classroom:

[Less successful students get treated] like they're bad, like every little thing that person does, they get picked on. Like if they come into the classroom late it's like a big thing, if like a good person comes in late, it's like 'why were you late?' and you get to sit down and do your work.
(Year 10, Black Caribbean, female)

In this case, simply asking 'why were you late?' allows the successful student the opportunity to explain their version of events. These pupils' opinion is deemed to be honest, reliable and valid compared to their less successful peers, who are generally not given the opportunity to explain themselves. Such unjust differences in treatment tend to engender despondency and frustration amongst some of the pupils:

I've seen two different students: the good one and the bad one. A teacher must have been talking, explaining the work, and the bad one must have asked a question but not put his hand up and he shouted out like 'what you doing? It's rude blah, blah, blah.' And the good one

done exactly the same thing but he got answered. There's no ... I don't see where the boundaries are. You can't just do that and then they don't expect you just to get up and then be angry!

(Year 11, Black African, male)

There was also evidence, as the following extracts indicate, that teachers tended to exercise an exaggerated level of control and discipline if successful pupils misbehaved.

Year 10 white male If you [as an academically successful student] do something wrong male then it will be picked up on quite easily than somebody who is less academically successful it would be less picked up on. Let's say you have done something bad like punched a teacher or something, you would get excluded worse than if you were less academically successful.

Researcher Why do you think that is?

Pupil *They're not meant to be that way.* They want more academically successful people in their school. More punishment is to like scare them 'cos if they were less academically successful I think it wouldn't scare them as much because they would just go and do it again which is weird but they don't know that, I don't think. I don't think teachers do know that or the headteacher....
[emphasis added]

Year 9, Black Caribbean, female I was talking once in Humanities and ... because this boy had my pen? And the teacher sent a letter home pen? And the teacher sent a letter home saying I was being disruptive.

Researcher ... Do you think she would have written the letter if you were not academically successful?

Pupil No 'cos I asked most of the people who aren't academic if they got a letter home for doing these things and they didn't.

Teachers appear unwilling to tolerate any form of misbehaviour from successful pupils since this may affect the likelihood of their attaining academically. This provides further evidence of the need to 'protect' pupils who are seen as an important investment, contributing to the school's success.

5. Discussion

If you had low expectations of a pupil, it's going be hard for them to achieve. If you aim low then I suggest you are gonna get low ... If you already think *when a person walks into your class* that this person is gonna end up in the gutter then all that stuff about knowing your kids and learning [about] where they have been and getting that feeling of achievement, where you have got them to exceed that place, you know ... what has been predicted for them [is] that *they are gonna end up in the gutter ... It's way below their actual potential and you think you've done a good job* therefore you're gonna do the same thing next year and the year after.

(Teacher C; emphasis added)

This research originally set out to understand the experiences of academically successful Black pupils and the ways in which school staff viewed them. It was found, however, that staff at Metropolitan High were largely unable to talk about Black pupils in the context of success. Instead, in line with the conclusions of existing research,³⁹ the findings expose some of the ways in which staff at this inner-city school seek to negotiate the pressure for improved grades and encourage the most 'valuable' pupils to succeed. In this pursuit, staff support and enforce two very different versions of

academic success: namely a high-status A* to C grade 'exclusive' success; and a lower-status D to G grade 'inclusive' success – each regarded as available to only certain types of pupil. Black male pupils, notably those engaging in what staff termed 'street culture', were unlikely to fit the profile of the pupil achieving in 'exclusive' terms. Positioning pupils in this way, to have low expectations of them simply because of *who* they are, legitimizes an acceptance of lower expectations and therefore poorer academic standards for Black pupils.

However, while the constructions presented in Table 1 (cross-ref page no.) offer a useful overview of the profile of successful and unsuccessful pupils, it is unlikely, given the fluidity of teacher perspectives and of pupil identities, that any individual pupil will sit neatly in either of these two categories. Instead, the concepts might best be regarded as part of a continuum (see Table 3) where pupils who present with more elements of the successful pupil, in terms of characteristics, ability, appearance, social class and family/home environment, can be regarded as having greater legitimacy within the school. In other words, these are the type of 'able' pupils that the school regards as suitable for achieving exclusive success. Conversely, those who present with more of the elements of an unsuccessful pupil can be regarded as having greater illegitimacy within the dominant discourse of the school as it struggles to apply limited resources to increase its chances of achieving well.

The findings shown in Table 3 allow for pupils to be positioned according to the dynamic between their own identity and that constituted by members of staff. This framework thereby challenges existing research on the school experiences and educational performance of Black pupils, which has tended to attribute the reasons for their differential achievement to either intrinsic cultural factors or to the structural constraints of school organization, governmental policy and teacher racism (see Section 1). Based on the evidence presented here, it is clear that this dichotomy is too simplistic. The complex interplay of pupil identities, choice (albeit limited and

³⁹ e.g. Cassen & Kingdon (2007); Gillborn & Youdell (2000)

inappropriately executed as they adapt their school uniform, wear elements of clothing likely to cause conflict with staff), alongside the implicit and rather arbitrary existence and application of staff rules governing the achievement of exclusive success, provides evidence for a third way: a culturalism-*within*-structuralism paradigm.

Table 3. Relationship between established pupil profile and predicted grades

Successful pupil	↔	Unsuccessful pupil
<i>Desirable attributes; Increased legitimacy</i>		<i>Undesirable attributes; Increased illegitimacy</i>
exclusive success (A* to C)		Inclusive success (D to G)
low predicted grades challenged		low predicted grades not challenged
high pupil/parent expectations not challenged		high pupil/parent expectations challenged

This new approach will help move debates beyond a solely *structuralist* analysis in which Black pupils are often reduced to victim, with little or no degree of choice and responsibility, but also beyond an exclusively *culturalist* perspective, which has tended to overlook the powerful role of policy and racisms and simplistically contributed to the pathologizing of Black pupils and their families.

The culturalism-within-structuralism paradigm represents other means by which future educational debates, projects and initiatives regarding Black pupils will be able to better prioritize and explore the complex ways in which policy is interpreted and ‘played out’ at school level, the extent to which its discourse can reinforce teachers’ subjective views about groups of pupils along axes of race, class and gender, and how its implementations differentially affect the school experiences of these pupils.

Within this framework, particular consideration should be paid to the ways in which language and certain sets of terminology (e.g. ‘potential’, ‘ability’, ‘high expectations’) common within educational policy discourse⁴⁰ tend, within the setting of the school, to ‘hide’ different sets of meaning depending on whom they are referring to.

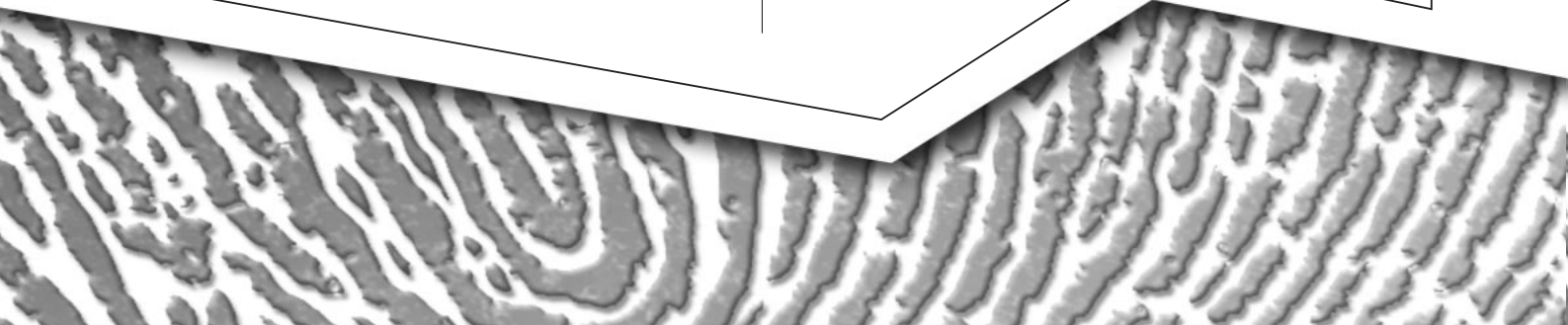
At the same time, however, the paradigm advocates consideration of the ways in which Black pupils themselves may inadvertently contribute to their own negative positioning as they attempt to negotiate their school existence. Addressing such processes at the levels of pupil, school and government remains important if Black pupils are to have a genuine opportunity to achieve in real (exclusive) terms. And it is to be hoped that, after declaring his determination to ‘invest in the educational chances of all children not just some’, new British Prime Minister Gordon Brown will be able to clearly demonstrate that every child really does matter.⁴¹

40 See e.g. Ofsted (1999:18); DfES (2003: 4); DfES (2004:45)

41 Brown (2007)

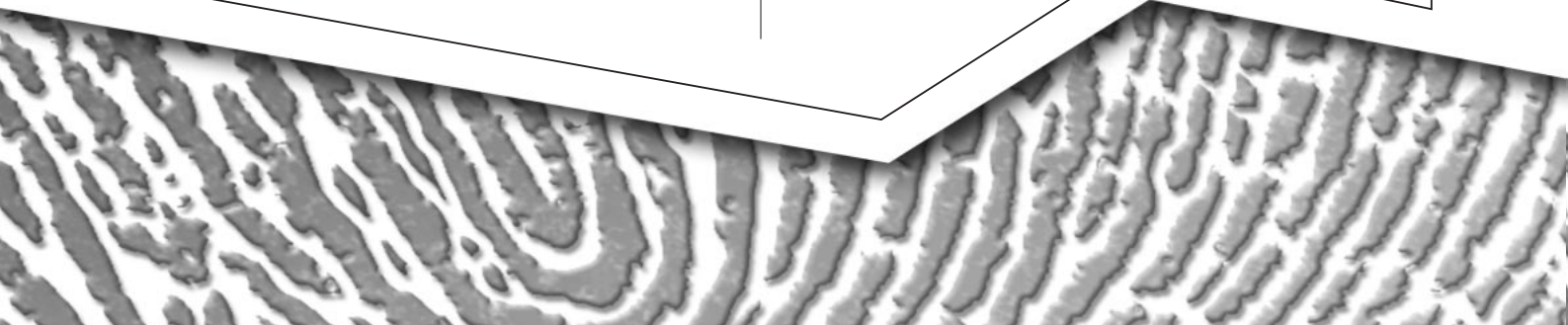
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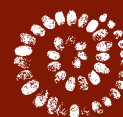
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