‘Left Behind’ White Pupils from Disadvantaged Backgrounds - Education Committee Submission - The Runnymede Trust

1. About Runnymede:

The Runnymede Trust is the UK’s leading race equality thinktank. We were founded in 1968, to provide evidence on racial inequalities, to inform policymakers and public opinion about the reality of those inequalities, and to work with policymakers, civil society and communities and policymakers to tackle them.

We hold the secretariat for the APPG on Race and Community, chaired by Rt. Hon. David Lammy MP, and publish reports, briefings and research on race equality issues. For example, most recently, we published a comprehensive study of race inequality in the UK, ‘Ethnicity, Race and Inequality in the UK: State of the Nation’ with the University of Manchester and Policy Press, and a report on economic inequality, The Colour of Money: How racial inequalities obstruct a fair and resilient economy.

This submission draws on the Runnymede Trust research on race and class prejudice and work on educational outcomes for BME students. We have also consulted at length with Professor David Gillborn and incorporated some of this work in this submission.

2. Summary of key issues:

- 1. Positioning White working-class disadvantage as an ethnic disadvantage rather than as class disadvantage places this group in direct competition with minority ethnic groups. It does very little to address the real and legitimate grievances poor White people in Britain have. The plight of these young White children, is a class issue rather than a race issue - in other words, their discrimination takes place because of their class and not because of their skin colour. This submission aims to highlight this and make the case that all pupils who face class disadvantage, race disadvantage and class and race disadvantage, deserve the attention and support to improve their educational attainment.


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2. The factors that work against the most ‘left-behind’ pupils are the same, whether they are white or black. Isolating White children as being ‘left behind’ when evidence shows that children from other backgrounds are also ‘left behind’, is damaging to all left-behind children.

3. Because of racism and discrimination, being Black is a disadvantage whatever your social status; being White is not. Positioning White working class disadvantage as an *ethnic disadvantage* rather than as *class* disadvantage is exactly what places this group in direct competition with minority ethnic groups. It does very little to address the real and legitimate grievances poor White people in Britain have. The plight of these young White children, is a class issue rather than a race issue - in other words, their discrimination takes place because of their class and not because of their skin colour².

3. We should recognise that the working-class has been ‘left behind’ and actively held back and these issues affect all working-class people, including BME working class groups. Further, it is important to tell stories that highlight these overlapping experiences between communities. This would help counteract ‘White working-class’ interests being pitched against those of migrant/BME communities, which serve to justify policies that dehumanise BME and migrants communities without improving the conditions of anyone on a low income³.

4. There has been a tendency to look at achievement based off of Free School Meals (FSMs) - explored further in section 4. When we look at GCSE achievement figures from 2016 as a whole we can see that Chinese children achieve the highest proportion of 5+ A*-C grades at 83% and Gypsy/Roma children receive the lowest at 10%. White British children stand in the middle with an achievement rate of 63%⁴.

4. According to the Department for Education’s own data⁵. White FSM boys outperform Black Caribbean FSM boys on all of their key achievement measures:
   - percentage getting strong pass in Eng & Maths: 14.4% v 11.2%  [mixed white/BC = 15.5%]
   - attainment 8 (average): 28.2% v 28.1%  [M: w/BC = 29.8%]
   - English Baccalaureate:  2.4% v. 2.3%  [M:W/BC = 2.2%]

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- 5. As an ethnic group, Gypsy, Roma and Traveller (GRT) students do less well than their White British counterparts on every measure at 16 years old, including FSM and NFSM and both sexes. In-spite of this, strategies to address the underachievement of White working-class students have consistently ignored and excluded GRT students.

- 6. We are concerned that this inquiry will continue the trend of placing the disadvantages faced by the White working class as more deserving and important than the very same disadvantages faced by other ethnic minority group.

3. Background and Context:

It is worth noting from the outset that this is not a race row and pitting children from different ethnic backgrounds against each other is not only highly damaging with regards to social cohesion, it ignores the large achievement gap among White British children from different socio-economic backgrounds.

The reasons “White working-class boys” are not performing well in schools is not to do with their race. We agree that we should be deeply concerned about why less than a third of White working-class boys do not achieve the expected attainment rates at GCSE level, but equally we should be asking the same questions about all children from disadvantaged backgrounds (even fewer boys from Gypsy Roma backgrounds are achieving the expected levels at GCSE). We cannot hope to raise the attainment levels of disadvantaged children until we’re honest about the impact of class inequalities, and deprivation, in our education system.

It is unsettling to note that since 2010 there have been 92 Education Committee reports and only two of those reports have explicitly focused on a named ethnic group. Even more concerning is that these two reports focused on White students.

The Runnymede Trust noted in our 2009 report on the White working class, ‘It is important to take the grievances of members of the White working class seriously, but the terms of the debate need to be widened to include the deeply ingrained hierarchical class structure which remains one of the hallmarks of British social life’.

In essence, the plight of the White working class has been constructed, by the media and successive governments, as well as anti-immigrant groups, as either the fault of BME groups or immigrants, or the supposed cultural deficit of the working class themselves. This harms both white working class pupils and BME pupils and ignores longstanding socio-economic factors that prevent educational attainment.

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4. Free School Meals and the ‘White working class’:

Using ‘working class’ narratives and frames which relate to 10% of the population is misleading. This is because around 60% of the population view themselves as working class. There is often slippage in terminology whereby FSM data is directly associated to ‘left behind’ and/or ‘working class’. This dangerously inflates the issue.

In other words, some focus on FSM data which accounts for around 13% of students is valid. However, the sole focus on this data in working class terms then means that 60% of the population who believe that they are working class, when they are not, believe they too are being ‘left behind’.

Such frames continue to position the White population as victims and play off one disadvantaged group against another. In reality, when referring to the underachievement of the White working class, the government is referring to roughly one-in-ten White children who claim FSMs. The figures for other, non white groups claiming FSMs are far higher. In reality, of those claiming FSMs just over one-in-five were Black pupils, just under one-in-five were pupils from a Mixed race background and 18% were Asian pupils with 11% being White students. In spite of this, much of the debate surrounding the underachievement of White pupils is framed within the context of Free School Meals. As of 2016, the percentage of pupils eligible for FSMs stood at 13%. Of this figure, 12% of those were White pupils. It is here that the context for under achieving White pupils is drawn. Within the FSM context, White children are across all ethnic groups least likely to achieve A*-C at GCSE level in English and Maths. The figure for White children here stands at 34%. However, within this category is GRT children who have an achievement rate of only 9%. In spite of this, such findings are rarely to never explored more deeply.

As academics have noted, when combining ‘White’ with ‘working class’ it speaks powerfully to anti-immigration, nationalist and racist sentiments. In this sense, by framing the debate in these terms the real issues are all too often silenced and suppressed. Rather than addressing...
the depravation and poverty that plagues the under achievement of ethnic minority groups and the underachievement of all children within an educational setting, a divisive narrative is developed where one group is positioned as more deserving than the other. This is in-spite of what the data and evidence shows us.

As work from The Runnymede Trust in 2019 showed, all too often we are seeing the voices of those in the most precarious situations played off against each other. Instead of seeing voices and struggles centred on the political agenda, communities continue to be divided and pitched against one another by these very tactics. The voices who single out White working class students as being at more risk than other minority ethnic groups are using these narratives to fuel a rhetoric of division and continue to scaremonger and deflect from tackling the real issues. Rather, it is important to build solidarity across difference and not view struggles as individualised but as affecting multiple different groups in similar ways.

5. Race and Class in the Education System for Black children:

As far as we are aware there has been no Education Select Committee investigating the barriers and challenges for the educational attainment of young Black pupils and students, particularly boys.

We know from research that Black Caribbean students are faced with chronic low expectations. This cuts across class. In a study drawing on the largest ever UK study of Black Caribbean middle-class parents, it showed that low expectations for Black children transcended class and pointed towards racism. Indeed, the experiences of Black children is of particular importance as it highlights the intersectional working of race, class and gender inequality. Within a policy discourse that focuses on the underachievement of White working-class students it is vital to note how other groups have been ignored within policy proposals.

Pitting the interests of the White working class against other ethnic minority groups has allowed consecutive governments to ignore the larger social and economic structures that are the root causes for this inequality. In this sense, the FSM data is used to highlight the disadvantaged position of White students and does not paint an accurate or holistic picture. As Gillborn (2012) noted, ‘Deep and persistent patterns of overall race inequality have been erased from the policy agenda; the fact that most minorities groups are out-performed by their White peers is entirely absent from debate’. A combination of low academic expectations from teachers, heightened surveillance, exclusions and criticism have created barriers that hit Black students the hardest.

Black students experience, on a systematic basis, greater negative teacher expectations than their White peers of the same gender and social class background. However, it is imperative

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17 https://www.jstor.org/stable/3196063

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to note that policy makers and not teachers are overwhelmingly to blame for higher exclusion rates in schools as a result of government-imposed targets and the constant pressure from Ofsted to ‘achieve’.

6. Principle Factors of Underachievement:

The factors that work against the most ‘left-behind’ pupils are the same, whether they are white or black. Isolating White children as being ‘left behind’ when evidence shows that children from other backgrounds are also ‘left behind’, is damaging to all left-behind children.

Aspirations and expectations vary by socioeconomic backgrounds because "social capital" matters\(^\text{18}\). Factors such as parental engagement, access to informed networks (i.e., knowing the "rules of the game"), use of tutors and time spent on/help with homework are also hugely influential and more of a product of socioeconomic status rather than “attitudinal” or “cultural factors\(^\text{19}\).

Indeed, as Professor David Gillborn has made clear to us, children who often do badly at the beginning of the schooling system are then placed on ‘interventions’. The constant regime of testing and interventions serves to put children in particular streams from an early age where children can only achieve a C grade at the most. The creation of institutional barriers and separate pathways does a disservice to the most vulnerable children. Furthermore, secondary schools that ‘set’ by ‘abilities’ work well for the children at the top but not for the others.

Focusing solely on the White working class’ underachievement - whilst important - distracts from the wider and deeper socio-economic inequalities faced by children from all backgrounds. Such focus also feeds racial hostility and plays into anti-diversity sentiments as well as erasing the wider realities of minority ethnic inequalities within the framework of institutional racism that still exists within the schooling system\(^\text{20}\).

Not only are White children on FSMs being failed by the current schooling system that pushes children in to ‘sets’ and caps what they can achieve, BME children and their underachievement is being ignored. Government policy should be formulated within a context of greater understanding of race and class and ethnic backgrounds. We know from research that the use of ‘sets’, streams and pathways within schools is biased on race and class grounds. Equality impact assessments should be used more widely and should acknowledge and address socio-economic and racial inequalities in a meaningful way\(^\text{21}\). As the Centre for Research in Race and Education have noted “There is considerable research evidence showing


\(^{20}\) [https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/research/crre/index.aspx](https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/research/crre/index.aspx)

\(^{21}\) [https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/research/crre/index.aspx](https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/research/crre/index.aspx)

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that routine decisions about assessment, selection and discipline, for example, act unneccessarily to disadvantage particular groups of pupils, especially those from working class and minority ethnic backgrounds”.

7. Priorities for the Government in Tackling this Issue:

There is not only a huge impact on life and individual chances by failing so many children there is also a vast economic impact. In 2007 an independent report to Government on raising the aspirations and attainment of Black boys and young Black men found that the economic cost of underachievement - at a conservative estimate - was £808 million every year\(^\text{22}\).

Whilst the under-performance of the White students, and all students, claiming FSMs remains a travesty it is important to look at this issue holistically. When observing the statistics for all the other students, who are not ‘left behind white pupils’ in other words around 90% of school children, it is Black Caribbean students who fare the worst. For those achieving five or more A*-C GCSE’s non FSM White males outperform their Black Caribbean peers, all but equal their Pakistani peers and have almost the same attainment rates as their Bangladeshi and Black African peers\(^\text{23}\).

The overall point here is that by continuing to refer to the White children who receive FSMs as ‘White working class’, without explaining the statistics, over 60% of the country - who identity as White British and working class - are led to believe that every ethnic minority outperforms their White children. This is not only factually misleading but continually serves to ignore the deep racial inequalities that other ethnic minority and in particular Black students face in an educational setting.

Indeed, as noted by Crawford (2018) “Pakistani, Bangladeshi, and Black Caribbean students of both sexes, and Black African males, are less likely to achieve success through the traditional gold-standard, higher value government benchmark (5+GCSEs A*-C inc. English and math [GCSE only exc. equivalents]), compared to nine-in ten White British peers (non-FSM)”. This overwhelmingly demonstrates how the use of FSM data in looking at attainment rates skews and misrepresents the issue\(^\text{24}\).

8. Suggested Programmes for Improvement:

1. Education has become centralised to the point where most secondary schools answer directly to the Department for Education. With a growing number of schools becoming

\(^{22}\) [https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/6778/1/reach-report.pdf]

\(^{23}\) [https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk]

\(^{24}\) [https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/02680939.2018.1531314]

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academies - academics now account for over 60% of all state-funded secondary schools - the problem is likely to get worse. We know that academies have higher rates of exclusion which disproportionally affect BME children. Data available suggests that 21.7% of Black Caribbean and 16.2% of mixed: White/Black Caribbean students were in sponsored academies compared with 11.5% of White British pupils (Crawford, Demack, Gillborn, Gillborn & Warmington, 2020). This suggests Black students are at greater risk of exclusion than others.

2. One such racialised policy which results in disproportionate outcomes is school exclusions. Black children and GRT children face far higher levels of exclusion than their White British counterparts. School exclusions are known to have detrimental effects on young people and overall life chances. An ongoing working paper has found that young people excluded from school are more likely to be victims of crime, and four times as many young people excluded from school fail to gain any qualifications at age 16 compared to those who are not excluded (Crawford, Demack, Gillborn, Gillborn & Warmington, 2020). With this in mind, the over representation in exclusions of Black pupils adds another dimension to their vulnerability within an educational setting. On average, over the past 20 years Black Caribbean students have been more than three times more likely to be excluded than their White counterparts.

3. The government should focus on improving educational attainment for all left-behind pupils, including white, and the many groups who fare worse, such as Black Caribbean, Gypsy, Roma and Traveller. If the government is seriously concerned about White children being left-behind then they should be just as concerned about all the other groups who fare even worse than White children.

4. A better understanding and use of statistics is vital. Many of the stats that are used - in particular FSM data - distort the crucial issues. Ethnicity is also often only included within statistical modelling after all other factors have been ‘controlled’ for. This ignores that many of these factors are in fact worsened by existing structural racial inequalities in areas including health, housing, employment, policing and criminal justice. The fact that Black students are more likely to live in deprived areas and low-income households and are more likely to attend low attaining schools are linked to systemic and generational racial inequalities. These factors must be addressed.

5. Removing zero tolerance policies which have been shown to worsen racial inequalities and exclusions for BME children.

6. Instead of placing the onus on pupils and parents attitudes, the education system should be more adaptable and flexible in supporting both pupils and parents. Research by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation has shown that it is effective to equip poorer parents with tailored


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advice, support and information to support their children in education rather than focus on the symptoms of their disengagement with education, or their “aspirations”\textsuperscript{28}.

7. Ensuring the curriculum incorporates and is more representative of working class and BME histories, figures and representation, would help in this regard. We know from educational research with Black and ethnic minority pupils that school practices (e.g. streaming/‘sets’) influence teachers’ expectations. How well schools meet the needs of pupils, including within the curriculum, is hugely important in shaping and predicting how well BME students do in school\textsuperscript{29}. This will also apply to White working-class children who are likely to have different experiences growing up from their better-off peers\textsuperscript{30}. Runnymede Trust research on the curriculum has shown that children prefer curricula that are more relevant to their lives, their history and their experience\textsuperscript{31}.

\textsuperscript{28} https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/can-changing-aspirations-and-attitudes-impact-educational-attainment

\textsuperscript{29} webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20130321032212/https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/eOrderingDownload/RB801.pdf


\textsuperscript{31} https://www.runnymedetrust.org/blog/why-the-history-of-migration-is-so-important

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