'You got a pass, so what more do you want?': race, class and gender intersections in the educational experiences of the Black middle class

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'You got a pass, so what more do you want?': race, class and gender intersections in the educational experiences of the Black middle class

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The article discusses the findings of an ESRC funded project (RES-062-23-1880) which used in-depth interviews to explore the educational experiences and strategies of 62 Black Caribbean parents; the biggest qualitative study of education and the Black middle class yet conducted in the UK. The article focuses on the parents' interactions with their children's teachers and, in particular, their experience that teachers tend to have systematically lower academic expectations for Black children (alongside a regime of heightened disciplinary scrutiny and criticism) regardless of the students' social class background. The parents' accounts highlight the significance of a cumulative process where a series of low level misdemeanours sometimes build into a pattern of seemingly incessant and unfair criticism that can have an enormously damaging impact on their children. Although our data suggest that these processes can involve children of both sexes and of any age, the parents report a particular concern for Black young men, whom they perceive to be especially at risk. Our findings demonstrate the continued significance of race inequality and illuminate the intersectional relationship between race and social class inequalities in education. This is particularly important at a time when English education policy assumes that social class is the overwhelming driver of achievement and where race inequity has virtually disappeared from the policy agenda. Our findings reveal that despite their material and cultural capital, many middle-class Black Caribbean parents find their high expectations and support for education thwarted by racist stereotyping and exclusion.

Keywords: teacher expectations; racism; social class; gender; intersectionality; parents

Introduction

This article draws on the largest ever qualitative study of education and the Black middle class in the UK to explore parents' interactions with teachers and, in particular, their experience that teachers tend to have systematically lower academic expectations for Black children. Alongside a regime of

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heightened disciplinary scrutiny and criticism, these lower expectations operate despite the parents' professional success, knowledge of the system and support for high educational aspirations. We draw on in-depth qualitative interviews[1] to explore the complex interaction of race, class and gender in making sense of the parents' experiences as they try to navigate the school system and support their children.[2] The educational experiences and strategies of the Black middle class have significance in their own right but also represent a critical case in relation to the wider politics of race, class and gender in education. We explore this context in the next section.

Why Black middle-class achievement matters to *everyone*: there is more to achievement than social class and parental attitudes

The experiences and achievements of Black students are important topics of study in their own right. However, the contemporary situation in England is such that the experiences of the Black middle class take on a particular significance as a critical case that illuminates the intersectional workings of race, class and gender inequality more broadly. This is because education policy discourse in England (in politics and the media) is currently dominated by a concern with social class inequalities and, in particular, the position of White working class students. This focus operates to remove race inequity from the agenda, places White people at the centre of policy debates, and provides the basis for an analysis that shifts the blame for educational failure onto the very students and communities that experience the injustice.

School low achievers are white and British

(Blair 2007)

White working-class boys are the worst performers in school

(Garner 2007)

Half school 'failures' are white working-class boys, says report

(Meikle 2007)

The headlines (above) are taken from national newspapers on a single day in 2007 and give a flavour of how an image of White racial victimhood in education has been created. The use of the phrase 'working class' is especially important and misleading: it is important because more than half the British population describe themselves this way (BBC News 2007); it is misleading because the statistics at the heart of the newspaper stories actually relate to only 13% of the student population, i.e. those in receipt of free school meals (FSM) (Gillborn 2010a, 12):

> The interests of the white working class are habitually pitched against those
> of minority ethnic groups and immigrants, while larger social and economic
> structures are left out of the debate altogether…there is a fairly consistent
> message that the white working class are the losers in the struggle for scarce
> resources, while minority ethnic groups are the winners – at the *direct expense*
> of the white working class. (Sveinsson 2009, 5: emphasis in original)

The FSM category is used as a crude proxy for family poverty in a good
deal of research, mainly because schools have the data to hand and so it is
much easier to gather and analyse than more complex and varied notions of
social class. There are numerous problems with using FSM status; most
working class students do not qualify for FSM and the official statistics
exclude students who *qualify* for FSM but do not take up the offer. Far from
indicating 'working class' status, therefore, FSM is not even a wholly reli-
able indicator of poverty. In addition, FSM status is not independent of sig-
nificant variation between different ethnic groups. Among the largest ethnic
groups, White students are the *least* likely to receive FSM but the achieve-
ments of this group are the *lowest* of all FSM groups (see Table 1). Conse-
quently *a focus on White FSM students has the effect of removing wider
race inequalities from view*: overall White British students are *more* likely
to achieve the benchmark level of success than all but one of the largest eth-
nic groups counted in English educational statistics (Table 1). Within each
of these groups girls are more likely to achieve the benchmark than their
male counterparts (DCSF 2009).

There is a further twist to how race and class dis/advantages are reported
in the media which, once again, serves to advance White interests. As
Table 1 illustrates, for White students the combination of relatively high
non-FSM achievement and particularly low FSM attainment means that the
'*FSM gap*' is much larger for White British students than for any other
group (32.5 percentage points). For Black Caribbean students the gap is
12.5 percentage points, a little above the lowest gap (9.9 for Bangladeshi
students). This pattern is not new and its consequences for policy and race
inequality are clear: '*privileging class inequality has the effect of privileging
White interests*…because educational inequalities associated with social
class do not appear to be equally important for all students regardless of eth-
nic background' (Gillborn 2008, 53: emphasis in original; see also Rollock
2007a). The FSM gap is increasingly highlighted (by academics and com-
mentators alike) as further evidence of the disadvantaged position of White
students via-à-vis their minoritized peers. For example, *The Guardian* news-
paper highlighted two presentations at the 2010 British Educational
Research Association (BERA) annual conference under the headline 'Social
class affects white pupils' exam results more than those of ethnic minorities
– study' (Shepherd 2010). The coverage included two key themes; first that
the achievement association with class is a problem for White pupils (and

Table 1.   Academic achievement by ethnic origin and free school meal status, both sexes, England 2009.

Ethnic Group[1]	Students achieving 5+ higher grade passes incl. English & maths [2]			FSM gap[3]	Percentage of ethnic group who are FSM	Number (N)
	N-FSM	FSM	All Pupils			
White British	54.3%	21.8%	51.0%	32.5	10.2%	457,346
Pakistani	47.0%	34.6%	43.1%	12.4	31.1%	15,892
Indian	69.3%	48.3%	67.2%	21.0	10.2%	13,291
Black African	55.0%	35.8%	48.4%	19.2	34.3%	12,833
Black Caribbean	42.1%	29.6%	39.4%	12.5	21.5%	7,944
Mixed (White Bl.Carib.)	46.9%	27.6%	42.4%	19.3	23.0%	6,183
Bangladeshi	53.0%	43.1%	48.4%	9.9	46.2%	5,944

Notes: 1. The official tables give results for more than 20 different ethnic categories; those listed here are the discrete ethnic groups with at least 5,000 students in the cohort.
2. The proportion of students in the ethnic group who achieved the benchmark level of achievement (at least five higher grade GCSE passes including English and mathematics) by students not in receipt of free school meals (N-FSM) and those in receipt of free school meals (FSM).
3. The percentage point difference between the achievement of N-FSM and FSM.
Source: original table using official data from DCSF (2009) *Key Stage 4 Attainment by Pupil Characteristics in England 2008/09* (SFR 34/2009) Table 2.

not for minoritized groups), and second, that high and low achievement are explicable in terms of family cultural resources:

> ...one of the reasons why class determines how white pupils perform at school is that white working-class parents may have lower expectations of their children than working-class parents from other ethnic groups. (...) Professor Ramesh Kapadia, who led the study, said this may be linked to 'cultural aspirations and expectations, as well as parental support for education. This appears to have been the case for Indian and Chinese pupils for many years,' he said. (...)
>
> Professor Steve Strand (...) said the effects of poverty are 'much less pronounced for most minority ethnic groups.' 'Those from low socio-economic backgrounds seem to be much more resilient to the impact of disadvantage than their white British peers,' he said. However, he added that well-off white children may do particularly well because their parents might be 'a bit more savvy about ensuring that they go to schools with similar pupils.' (Shepherd 2010)

The dominant view of race, class and gender in contemporary English education, therefore, cites quantitative data to argue that White pupils in general, and White working-class boys in particular, are the group at most risk of academic failure. *Deep and persistent patterns of overall race inequality have been erased from the policy agenda; the fact that most minoritized groups are out-performed by their White peers is entirely absent from debate.* Meanwhile, both success and failure are deemed to be a function of family- and/or community-specific dispositions. This is an extremely powerful combination of themes; by placing 'poor White people' at the heart of debate, politicians and commentators *appear* to be concerned with issues of social justice and yet the deficit discourse of low aspirations allows them to lay the blame at the door of the very people they claim to support (see Allen 2009; Gillborn 2010a). The real winners in this constellation of discourses are White elites, whose own high achievement is seen as the natural, rightful reward for hard work.

It is in this context that the present study represents a potentially crucial intervention. Contrary to the dominant preoccupation with White students, and especially those living in economic disadvantage, our focus is on the experiences of the Black middle class. Drawing on the insights of Critical Race Theory (CRT), we reject the automatic focus on White people as the normative centre for analysis and, instead, foreground the experiences and voices of people of colour. In particular, we build on the CRT tenet that scholarship should accord a central place to the experiential knowledge of people of colour as a means of better understanding and combating race inequity in education (Delgado and Stefancic 2001; Gillborn 2008; Ladson-Billings and Tate 1995; Lynn and Parker 2006; Matsuda et al. 1993; Solórzano and Yosso 2002). In this case the focus is particularly important because, as we show in the remainder of this article, our data suggest that racism remains a potent

force in education; social class advantage (including material wealth and possession of middle-class cultural and social capital that are valuable in interactions with schools) does not provide an automatic ticket to success; and, in particular, parental expectations cannot be assumed to be the predominant cause of underachievement in a system where the expectations of *White teachers* continue to exert enormous influence.

Researching the educational strategies of the Black middle class

Over a two year period (2009 to 2011) we interviewed 62 Black middle-class parents who self-identified their family origins as Black Caribbean. In a second round of interviews, guided by themes that were emerging from the data, we revisited 15 interviewees to explore key issues in greater detail.[3] Conscious of the very different economic, migratory and social profiles of minoritized groups, we chose to focus on a single ethnic group so that we could do justice to the particular context within which our respondents engaged with the education system. The Black Caribbean community has a long and distinguished history in the UK (Ramdin 1987). Many of the most prominent community-based campaigns for racial justice have been led by people whose families migrated to Britain as part of the Caribbean Diaspora (see James and Harris 1993; John 2006; Sivanandan 1990). Nevertheless, this group continues to experience pronounced educational inequity; among the largest ethnic groups Black Caribbean students are the least likely to attain national achievement benchmarks (Table 1) and the most likely to be permanently excluded (expelled) from school (Equality and Human Rights Commission 2010, 313; Gillborn and Drew 2010).

Potential interviewees were recruited via press advertisements, announcements on relevant web sites, and via word-of-mouth; Black professional organisations were a particularly fruitful source. Interviewees were screened to ensure that they had at least one child between the ages of 8 and 18, so that we could explore their strategies and experiences at key points in the education system. The majority of interviewees were mothers who live and work in London but we also made a point of including some parents outside London, including in the North of England. Conscious of the complex debates surrounding the issue of Black masculinities, and wishing to move beyond the popular stereotype of the absent Black father (Donnor and Brown 2011; Reynolds 2010), we made a particular effort to include male interviewees; who account for 20% of our sample. In terms of social class we focused on people working in professional or managerial occupations, specifically those ranked in the top two categories of the eight which make up the National Statistics Socio-economic Classification (NS-SeC); an occupationally-based classification that has been used for all official statistics and surveys in the UK since 2001 (Office for National Statistics 2010).

We used a semi-structured interview schedule that explored our respondents' experiences as children (some of whom had migrated to the UK with their parents) and as adults negotiating the education system on behalf of their own children. Interviews typically lasted around 90 minutes but some went on considerably longer. Interviewees were given the opportunity to express a preference for an interviewer of the same ethnic background; 14 (23%) explicitly stated that they preferred to be seen by Dr Rollock (the team member of Black Caribbean heritage) and, overall, more than 80% of the interviews were undertaken by Dr Rollock. All interviews were audio recorded, transcribed and then coded across the team as themes emerged and were refined using the constant comparative method.

Our research, therefore, questioned people with well paid jobs who have successfully navigated the system. Nevertheless, it was rare to find anyone who felt that race/racism was *not* an important factor in understanding their own experience of the world in general, and, in particular, their children's chances in education. One of the parents' most common concerns was that teachers tended to have too modest expectations of Black children. This is the focus for the rest of this article; we begin with the parents' recollections of their own experiences as school children.

Experiencing low teacher expectations as a child

> ... I am just determined that they are not going to get what I got at school; which was not very much. (Richard, Director, Voluntary Sector)

A concern that teachers tend to have too low expectations of Black children was common across the majority of our interviewees. In some cases the parents (mostly schooled in Britain between the 1960s and 1980s) had clear memories of their own experiences at the hands of teachers who did not see Black children as academic prospects. Gabriel, for example, recalls the crude racism he experienced as a child at the hands of White peers *and* teachers. He describes the 'big shock' he experienced when, as a 13-year-old, he moved to a selective (grammar)[4] school in the English midlands:

> The racism was *ferocious* from the other students in the school and some of the teachers (...) things like calling me names, like 'gollywog' and 'jungle bunny'; putting the blackboard rubber across my brow, marking my face. All day, all day, comments from them. So it was a miserable place... (Gabriel, Education Consultant)

Racism saturated Gabriel's experience of grammar school and some teacher's made no attempt to hide their view of Black students as intellectually inferior. In one incident he recalls that, after initially being refused membership of the chess club, he went on to beat a rival school's top player

only to be rewarded with his teacher's surprised exclamation: 'I didn't think *you people* played chess.'

Our sample is not large enough to draw any definitive conclusions about whether such overt incidents were more likely in academically selective contexts, but several of our interviewees reported especially blatant incidents in selective schools and/or in selective teaching groups within mixed (comprehensive) schools:

> ...you would get things like, 'Oh I didn't think we had any Black girls in the A set.' Because even though it was a girls' grammar school they had always been used to the Black girls not always being in the top sets and things like that. (Brenda, Head of Research, Voluntary Sector)

> So I went to an all girls' school and I suppose my experience there was overtly racist basically, it was *overtly* racist. (...) I was put in the remedial [special education] class at school initially and my mum had to fight to get me out into another stream. Because it was just the assumption that you're Black, that's where you belong. So school, I think my school years were a complete waste of time really (...) I wasn't even put in for exams or anything. It was just assumed that we wouldn't, you know, I wouldn't get the results. (Barbara, Child Health Professional)

Robert (who attended a grammar school in the 1960s) recalls growing conflict between himself and teachers against the backdrop of increasing Black consciousness movements in the wider society:

> ...there was a lot of undermining by people who I think were racist and who clearly had no respect for me as a person; who had no respect for the sort of things that I was positive about...black person, black culture, who my heroes should be and so on. Maybe they couldn't help it because of *their* backgrounds. But I found myself in constant conflict with them. And don't forget that this was a time – 1964 onwards – when, if you like, there was an *awakening* of Black consciousness (...) I would call myself, to annoy them, Robert *X*, things like that. There was just a *clash* with authority. But obviously it wasn't one way traffic because it wasn't just *me* railing against them; in a way I was railing against them because I felt that they were very denigrating towards things that I thought were important in asserting who I was... (Robert, Academic in Higher Education)

Conflict with teachers and teachers' low expectations went hand-in-hand for many of our interviewees. Indeed, Robert states clearly that anything other than low expectations would have been so out of the ordinary as to arouse his suspicion:

> ...the teachers also obviously played a part in guiding certain people in the Oxbridge direction. So even though I was one of the brightest no-one ever suggested that I aspire to that. But you know, towards the end of my time there, I was really so disenchanted that if they suggested something like that,

coming from some of them, I would've thought that they were trying to harm me, you know, it was that bad. (Robert, Academic in Higher Education)

Although most of our interviewees did not report *overt* acts of racism at the hands of their teachers, a clear majority reported feeling that, as children, they had faced systematically lower teacher expectations:

> For me secondary school was a positive experience socially, the problems came with the expectations of the teachers on me, they didn't expect much (...) school was more of a social place rather than an academic, there was no expectation of me as a child from the teachers, it was just, 'you're here, let's just take you through the system.' (Cynthia, Teacher)

Teachers' lower expectations were often difficult to pin down explicitly but became clearer at points of selection, when students were placed in hierarchical teaching groups or denied access to high status subjects and examinations:

> I left school with six grade one CSE's [Certificate of Secondary Education: the lower status exam] because I wasn't allowed to do 'O' Levels [the higher status exam] (...) the way the streaming of the school went, that there was one set of people who were destined for 'O' Levels and another who no matter what happened would be doing CSE's and I was put in a sort of B stream, so we knew I'd be doing CSE's, and despite the fact that I felt that when I came here I was so far ahead of the children in my set (...) I felt that it was a survival battle to actually get grade one just to prove that I was capable. (Vanessa, Community Development Officer).

Despite sometimes difficult, even traumatic experiences in school when they were children, our interviewees have ultimately succeeded in attaining professional careers that place them in the highest social class groupings. They have high expectations for their children and are vigilant for signs of possible problems. In many cases they report that, although times have changed and racism is rarely as crude and obvious as in their childhood, low expectations among teachers remain a critical concern.

Parental experiences and the expectations of teachers

> ...you're not gonna walk into the school and someone's gonna call you 'nigger.' But the absence of that doesn't mean everything else is [fine]. It's the subtlety and I think it is more on an interpersonal level now rather than institutional. But of course the people in the institution, so it can become institutional because there's so many of them in the one place. (Jean, Further Education Lecturer)

British society has changed considerably since the post-war surge in immigration from the British Commonwealth but, as our interviewees point out, it

would be a mistake to imagine that the relative absence of *overt* racism signals a sea change in deeper attitudes. Crude and obvious displays of race hatred are now rare; gone are 'the signs in windows: "No Dogs, No Coloureds, No Irish" that were almost iconic in their depiction of London in the 1950s and 1960s' (McKenley 2005, 16). And yet anti-immigrant policy was a central theme in the 2010 General Election and one of the new government's first acts was to announce stricter English language tests for new migrants (BBC News 2010). When it comes to monitoring their children's experiences in school, our interviewees are alert for indications of more subtle racism:

> I think the same emotions that drive the racism and the way it manifests itself, the emotions are there, they are the same. The way it manifests itself is possibly more covert now because increased awareness has led to some people wanting to examine what they do and change; and other people wanting to *hide* what they do. So I think it is more covert, it is more subtle in some ways. (Ella, Senior Health Professional)

Academic selection occurs throughout children's school lives in England, and can have a huge impact on their educational opportunities. However, the key points of selection, and the processes that lie behind them, are increasingly hidden. For example, students in primary school are assessed and ranked by teachers who then place them in different 'interventions' that can lead to academic routes or more 'remedial' action (Bradbury 2011). Later, students are assessed (sometimes using IQ tests) on entry to secondary school and may be placed in hierarchical groups that restrict their curriculum and determine entry to low status examinations when they are 16 (Gillborn and Youdell 2000). All of these processes have been shown to disadvantage Black students but none of them are open to parental scrutiny (Gillborn 2008, 2010b; Tikly et al. 2006). As a result, Black middle-class parents have to see through the veneer of pleasantries that often greet them at parents' evenings (where teachers are keen to run through a brief meeting without incident). Cynthia, who works as a teacher herself, became concerned when she read through her child's work: 'Low expectations; work not being marked; *wrong* being marked *right*; no direction.' She continues:

> we go to parents evening and they would say to every parent, 'Oh your children are wonderful, well behaved, they're so polite.' Yeah, I got that, that's my job, I don't need to hear that from you. It was nice to hear but I want you to tell me *academically* what's going on, where they're at (...) And I just wasn't getting that, as long as they were nice and polite, it was okay. (Cynthia, Teacher)

Cynthia's concerns are echoed by many of our interviewees, who suspect that White teachers are content with Black students so long as they do not cause trouble and look likely to achieve a basic passing grade (which will

add to the school's profile in published performance tables); they see little or no evidence of teachers pushing students to attain the highest possible grades. Vanessa speaks for many when she summarizes her son's experiences and the minimal expectations that his teachers had for him:

> We had in the final year [aged 16] the expectations from some of his teachers, you picked up that they said 'Well you got a pass, so what more do you want? Where we weren't expecting you to get a pass.' (...) [Eventually] he got a mixture of A stars [the highest possible grade], As, I think his lowest grade was a B for sociology – which upset him because they lost his coursework, his coursework got *mislaid*. (Vanessa, Community Development Officer)

When prizes are awarded and extra resources are allocated, Black students are typically notable by their absence. This trend is visible to our interviewees, several of whom detail occasions when their children's achievements were overlooked in one way or another. Robert (below) was angered when his daughter's achievements were absent from the celebrations bestowed on her White peers: 'clearly she wasn't their blue-eyed person.' Similarly, Malorie points to the racially exclusive composition of a newly established programme for 'gifted' children:

> ... the school was running a gifted and talented programme (...) they selected the young people who they saw as gifted and talented to be a part of this programme and started to do things with them, extended their experiences and opportunities and as I say, found out about it by default. (...) So they chose these young people and do you know what? All of them were White. (Malorie, Education Manager, Local Authority)

> You look at objective things and you make your objective judgements and you see how prizes are being distributed and so on. (...) I remember in one case I actually wrote to the school to point out that [my daughter] wasn't listed in the school magazine as having got a certain award in music, a certain grade in music exams, and they actually wrote to say that it would be corrected and they would put something in the magazine next year. So that was something that I did in one case, but the fact is I couldn't quite understand how it was that *her* achievements were omitted; clearly she wasn't their blue-eyed person. Whereas someone else's comparable achievement hadn't been omitted. (Robert, Academic HE)

Our interviews suggest, therefore, that middle-class status is no protection from the low expectations that research has highlighted as an almost constant threat to the school experiences and achievements of Black Caribbean students (Crozier 2005; Gillborn 1990, 2008; Gillborn and Youdell 2000; Rhamie 2007). In addition, our data reveal the importance of *cumulative* processes of heightened control and disciplinary punishment, alongside the lower academic expectations. This issue is explored in the following section

via detailed consideration of the experiences of one of our interviewees and her eight-year-old son.

'It's like you're trying to break his spirit': cumulative processes of criticism and control

Drawing on her research with 22 Black British families,[5] Gill Crozier reached the following conclusion:

> . . .according to the parents' accounts the young black people in this study have had a pattern of cumulative negative experiences that have often contributed to their demotivation; in a number of cases their permanent exclusion from school, and in most cases leaving school at 16 with fewer qualifications than their parents had expected. (Crozier 2005, 595)

Similar patterns emerge in our data, suggesting that middle-class status, enhanced cultural and social capital, and even a high profile role as a parent representative in school, are no protection from these processes, which appear to run deep in English schools. Rather than present a succession of further brief quotations on this matter, a more detailed description of a single case will more accurately convey the sense of outrage and despair generated by the cumulative damage suffered at the hands of repeated unfairness. The case concerns Jean (a lecturer in a further education college) and her eight-year-old son Kareem.

Jean reports that her son's personality has drawn attention throughout his schooling. Teachers have commented on his 'charisma and charm' but these have been viewed as a problem and Kareem has been portrayed as a bad influence on his peers:

> . . .he's been labelled as being charismatic but in a *negative* way. Yeah, so from reception [the very start of formal schooling aged 4], 'Oh he's got this charisma and charm that he manages to lead the other children astray'. So what is it? This is the sort of label that he's been getting. I mean I would have thought that charisma and charm was something quite *positive*.

Over time Jean feels that a pattern of almost continual criticism developed as an over-reaction to the minor nature of the problems and cast her son as a repeat offender:

> . . .this has been going on for a while. Little silly things. I'd come in to school collecting him and now [the teacher is telling me] 'He's done this today' and 'He's done that'. And hand-on-heart, he's never physically hurt someone. He's never been aggressively rude and abusive or offensive to adult or child. It's maybe attention-seeking, silly boyish eight-year-old behaviour that I think you should be able to manage if you're a professional.

A notable flash-point occurred when Kareem was selected to attend a class especially designed for Black children seen as at risk of failing. Although this intervention might sound like a positive development, Jean feels that a lack of proper planning and resources resulted from the simple, and errone-ous, assumption that a course for Black boys would not require the same level of skill and professional preparation taken-for-granted in other parts of the curriculum. She explains:

> The danger is sometimes, with some of these initiatives for young Black boys, is the only qualification for [leading] an intervention is that you're a Black male. Erm, [pauses]. *It's not enough*. You know, I've met many a Black male who actually [she addresses an imaginary 'mentor'] *keep away from kids at all costs*. Yeah, so this guy (...) You recognise your target group is maybe children who are having some problems focusing, concentration, so actually you [should] come equipped with some strategies to get them on board. And in this one hour session, apparently Kareem disrupted it so bad that [the adult] couldn't continue. What's Kareem doing? He's rocking on his chair, and he might be going [drums fingers on the desk] and making the other boys laugh. Now I wouldn't mind if he got up and kicked you and punched you...well I *would*, but [I could understand the reaction] if it was something *extreme*, but it was *low level*.

In addition to her frustration at what appeared to be an over-reaction from the staff member concerned, Jean also detected that a no-win situation was developing where her son was *always* deemed to be at fault. On this occa-sion Kareem was disciplined for distracting his peers, but in previous meet-ings to discuss his behaviour the issue had been reversed, with the accusation being that Kareem was too easily distracted by others:

> I've had this conversation with this man where, you know, one of Kareem's things is to not be distracted by others. Oh. *So* when *he's* doing the distracting and others are being distracted, surely *they* should be spoken to, not to be dis-tracted by him? Now it sounds like I'm being really picky here but - so he gets in trouble if he's a *distractor* and also if he's *distracted*.

The situation came to a head over an apparently tiny matter which high-lights the devastating cumulative nature of the problems that can face Black children and their parents, regardless of social class. Once again, the context might appear superficially to be a positive multicultural situation (a project around the election of the USA's first-ever Black president). As Jean explains, her son was highly motivated and engaged by the topic; he pro-duced exceptional work and, co-operating with peers, he won an exciting reward which was summarily taken from him as an additional punishment for a completely unrelated and minor infraction of playground rules.

> ...the icing on the cake was when he did this activity in a class, in his class, and erm, it was all around the Barack Obama stuff, which I thought was

really positive. They did their own election campaign in groups and his lead-
ership skills came to the fore, [he] came out with some stuff for his campaign
and his group *won*. So their reward was to run the class for the afternoon the
following week. And he was so inspired by this Barack Obama. He'd done
some writing on him, cut some pictures out, and made a scrapbook thing at
home. He'd done this in class as well and was really really looking forward
to it and had ideas of what he was gonna do, and then he was excluded from
that.

Yeah he was excluded from that.

His teacher wouldn't allow him to do it because at lunch time when the bell
rang, he wasn't lining up. He was put in the office. He was put in the office
and then his teacher saw him in there and decided not only was he gonna
miss his - he missed his play time [recess]. I would have thought that was the
sanction for not lining up. Missed his play time but also he wasn't going to
take part in the after lunch campaign. (...)

It's like you're trying to break his spirit to a certain extent. Erm, and he's not
a crier, my boy's not a crier, but he was crying now that he didn't want to go
to school and this had been going on for weeks now.

Jean is a professional educator and was active in her son's school as
chair of the governing body (officially the most high profile role avail-
able to a parent). These roles might be expected to generate a certain
amount of respect from fellow educators in her son's school but this was
not the case:

I'm chair of governors and they've just no respect. If there's no respect for
me, it translates into this for your kids. And I'm not missing out – I mean
obviously I've really *summarised* it – I'm not, he's not done anything that
I've missed out. Like he's kicked someone or sworn, he's not done *anything*
like that. And I agree some of the behaviour was really *irritating* at worst, but
actually I don't think it warranted that repeated kind of... [her voice trails
off]

Jean moved Kareem to a new school where his relationship with teachers
has been much improved. Her case captures, in painful detail, the cumula-
tive damage wrought by a process that showed her son no understanding,
and her no respect. At no time was Kareem accused of any major rule-
breaking but the sense of continual – often unfair – criticism drove mother
and son to a point where neither could continue with the school. Fortu-
nately, Jean's personal networks and understanding of the system (her mid-
dle-class cultural capital) helped her to secure an alternative school for her
son; but the damage was done and continues to be done to other Black chil-
dren in the same situation.

It's different for boys?

> I think as a Black *guy* and not a *small* Black guy, you know, the instant per-
> ception is of, in the street, is of someone who might be dangerous, might be a
> little bit violent, might be a little bit angry. I am not the first person people
> come up and ask the time. (Richard, Director, Voluntary Sector)

The intersection between racialized and gendered inequalities is complex
and prone to oversimplification. In terms of academic achievement, Black
Caribbean students of *both* sexes are less likely to succeed in school than
their White counterparts. However, the average achievements of Black boys
are lower than those of their female counterparts and the gap between Black
and White boys is bigger than the gap for Black and White girls.[6] Clearly,
both gender and race are significant factors. This complexity tends to be
overlooked in much popular discussion about race and achievement. As we
have noted (above) the educational landscape in contemporary England is
dominated by the erroneous assumptions that White 'working class' children
are the lowest attaining group and that race inequality is no longer an
important issue. When race inequality *is* mentioned in the media, it is fre-
quently assumed that the 'problem' relates only to Black *boys* and the blame
is quickly laid at the door of the children, their families and communities:

> African-Caribbean boys are still at the bottom of the league table (...) They
> have failed their GCSEs because they did not do the homework, did not pay
> attention and were disrespectful to their teachers. (Sewell 2010, 33)

> Black boys aren't being failed; many are failing themselves. Those who went
> to school in London have their stories about the unteachable black boys who
> viewed the whole idea of education as effeminate. (West 2010)

These kinds of perspectives trade on the stereotypical view of the Black male
as hyper-masculine, i.e. prone to acts of aggression and unsuited to academic
study. Black female sexuality has been similarly fetishized (Gilman 1987;
Pajaczkowska and Young 1992) and Black young women and their mothers
face a range of negative stereotypes inside schools (Mirza and Joseph 2010;
Youdell 2006, 119–24). This complex interplay between race and gender is
present in the experiences and concerns of the Black middle-class parents in
our study. In particular, a strong theme throughout the interviews is the
greater threat of stereotyping and exclusion perceived to operate for Black
boys and young men – a gendered stereotype documented in numerous
school ethnographies (Connolly 1998; Gillborn 2008; Rollock 2007b; Wright
1986). As Kareem's case (above) highlights, even very young Black boys
can find themselves singled out for unwanted negative teacher attention.
Similarly, Paulette identifies a clear pattern to teacher/student interactions in

her son's primary school where Black boys appear to be cast in an especially negative role:

> There were all these issues about him at primary school, 'yes his work is excellent but he can't sit still, he is out of the room, he is out of his seat' – all that nonsense – 'he is answering back' (...) so I felt given the way that the school was responding to him, the primary school, erm given the way that the primary school responded to Black boys: Black boys were always in trouble, Black boys were always outside the head teacher's office, there was that kind of.... Black boys had a particular *part* at that school. I just felt that he was going to hit secondary and I can see it going pear shaped. (Paulette, Psychologist)

Paulette's words are particularly significant because, despite his teachers' judging his work to be 'excellent,' her son was increasingly experiencing a pattern of cumulative criticism (similar to the one discussed above) and in line with the role into which the school cast Black boys as a group. Several of our parents discuss the difficulties they face in balancing a desire to support their sons against such labelling, whilst also being conscious of the danger of dispiriting them by seeming to suggest that the odds are entirely stacked against them. No matter how carefully they try to strike this balance, however, their sons' perceptions are often painfully clear:

> My son said to me this morning...(...) 'if you are a White kid, you can just be a kid, you can just be a child. But if you're Black, you're a *Black* child.' You know, you can just *be*, it's much easier if you're White but if.... Black comes first. And he's fourteen and he was saying that, as an example, that his friends, his White friends just have a different experience, a completely different experience, a freedom that [my son and his Black friends] don't have, that he feels he doesn't have as a Black child. (Barbara, Child Health Professional)

Barbara's teenage son poignantly captures the ever-present threat of racism and racialized labelling in a world where his White peers 'can just be a child. But if you're Black, you're a *Black* child.'

Our interviewees, therefore, are especially concerned that Black boys and young men face a persistent and significant threat of racist stereotyping (against which their middle-class status is little shield). It would be a mistake, however, to fall into the trap of forgetting that stereotyping (although most pronounced for boys) is by no means absent from the lives of Black students of all ages and both genders. As Femi's six-year-old daughter discovered, stereotypes of Black threat and physicality appear to know almost no limits:

> My six-year-old daughter who is yay high [indicates height of a small child] had '*threatened and intimidated*' the teaching assistant. Now, first of all, my daughter doesn't do that at home, so I'm wary; and second, I'm thinking

you're a teaching assistant, how can you be intimidated by a six-year-old girl who hasn't spat on you, hasn't kicked you, hasn't thumped you – what exactly did she do that is so threatening because I struggle to understand a situation where you would be threatened? (Femi, Lecturer FE)

Conclusion

At a time when English education policy is dominated by a focus on White working class students it may seem surprising that research should focus on the experiences of Black middle-class parents. We believe, however, that our interviewees' experiences are of vital importance in their own right *and* as the basis for informing a more critical perspective on contemporary education more broadly. For example, the relatively large gap within the White group, between economically advantaged and disadvantaged peers, is currently discussed (by media and academics alike) as indicating a problem for poor Whites whereas people of colour are assumed to be more resilient or less susceptible to class inequality. But the flip side of the same coin is that the narrow class gap among Black students significantly reflects the lower average achievements of middle-class students in this group. Far from reflecting a relative advantage for Black students, therefore, the smaller class gap within this group indicates the difficulty that middle-class Black parents have in drawing advantage from the greater material and cultural capital at their disposal. This is not because of a lack of commitment, low aspirations or being insufficiently 'savvy' about the education system (Shepherd 2010). Our data show that middle-class Black parents are ambitious for their children and take a keen interest in their education, unfortunately, many encounter an education system that views their children as more likely to cause trouble than to excel academically. Teachers' lack of academic expectations, in tandem with a heightened degree of surveillance and criticism, create powerful barriers.

Notes

1. We employ usual interview transcript notation, e.g.
   (…) = speech has been edited out
   … = pause
   Emphasized text = original emphasis
   [square brackets] = editorial information/clarification
2. To protect anonymity all names have been replaced with pseudonyms.
2. To protect anonymity all names have been replaced with pseudonyms.
3. The research was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (grant number RES-062-23-1880).
4. Grammar schools restrict entry to students who have passed some form of academic selection.
5. Crozier's interviewees covered a wide range of social class backgrounds 'from professional to unskilled and unemployed' (2005, 587)
6. In 2009, 54.4% of White British girls achieved five higher grade passes including English and maths, compared with 45.7% of Black Caribbean girls (a gap

of 8.7 percentage points); 47.8% of White British boys achieved this level, compared with 32.9% of Black Caribbean boys (a gap of 14.9 percentage points): Source: DCSF 2009: Table 2.

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