

# [INSIGHTS]

## WHAT ACCOUNTS FOR ETHNIC ACHIEVEMENT GAPS IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN ENGLAND?

**This study explores the size of ethnic, gender and social class gaps in achievement at age 14 and asks what factors might account for ethnic achievement gaps. For most minority groups, high levels of socio-economic deprivation can account for the achievement gaps. However, Black Caribbean students are distinctive, since socio-economic status (SES) cannot account for their achievement gap and they are the only ethnic group making less progress than White British students aged 11-14. Further analysis of the pattern of entry to different tiers of national tests suggests that teacher expectations may play some part in explaining the gap for this specific group.**

### KEY POINTS

- 1 Ethnic achievement gaps at age 14 are more than three times the size of the gender gap, although only about one-third of the size of the social class gap.
- 2 SES can account for the Black African, Pakistani and Bangladeshi achievement gaps, although these groups still underachieve given their high motivation and commitment.
- 3 SES could not account for the Black Caribbean achievement gap and they were the only ethnic group to make less progress aged 11-14 than White British students.
- 4 Black Caribbean students were systematically under-represented in entry to the higher tiers of national tests at age 14, and this could not be not accounted for by prior achievement or a wide range of other factors.

### MAJOR IMPLICATIONS

- 1 Policy needs to focus clearly on the substantial socio-economic gap. The new pupil premium funding arrangements are welcome in this regard.
- 2 A large proportion of the Black African, Pakistani and Bangladeshi gap reflects socio-economic factors, but schools need to consider what other barriers exist to higher achievement.
- 3 The poor progress and low achievement of Black Caribbean students is a particular concern and the results suggest teacher expectations may play some part in this.
- 4 Schools should monitor and review ethnic patterns in disciplinary actions and the ethnic composition of sets and tiers of entry to GCSE examinations.

## THE RESEARCH

### BACKGROUND

Public concern about the achievement of ethnic minority groups has been long-standing in England. Broadly speaking, the mean scores of Black Caribbean, Black African, Pakistani and Bangladeshi students are below the mean for their White British peers, while the mean scores for Chinese, Indian and Irish students are higher than the mean of their White British peers.

The most frequently cited explanation for ethnic gaps in educational attainment relates to the substantial differences in socio-economic status between Black and White groups. Socio-economic disadvantage may have a direct influence on children's development, for example through limited material resources and an increased risk of a range of health and developmental problems, and an indirect influence through parental education, expectations and aspirations. However, large-scale representative studies have had mixed success.

This paper reports an analysis of the educational attainment and progress between age 11 and age 14 of over 14,500 students from the nationally representative Longitudinal Study of Young People in England (LSYPE). The outcomes of interest were students' achievement in National tests in English, mathematics and science at age 14, and in progress between age 11 and age 14. A wide range of explanatory variables were considered and organised into four main groups:

- Family background
- Parental attitudes and behaviour
- Student risk and protective factors
- School context and neighbourhood deprivation

### ACHIEVEMENT GAPS

The results are presented in Figure 1. The base model reveals large ethnic achievement gaps in national tests at age 14, with a three-point gap for Black Caribbean, Black African, Pakistani and

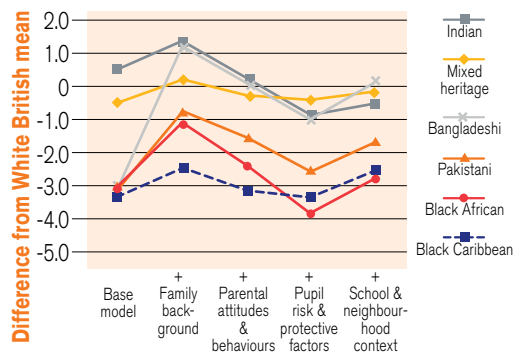
Bangladeshi pupils, indicating that these groups were on average a full year behind their White British peers in terms of National Curriculum (NC) levels.

Controlling for family socio-economic variables eliminated the Bangladeshi gap and substantially reduced the Black African and Pakistani gaps. This is a positive finding since it indicates only small differences compared to White British students of 'similar' family SES. However, including further controls for parental attitudes and student risk/resilience was associated with a marked decline in their average achievement. Although these three minority groups were on average *more* advantaged than White British students on the measures, this was not reflected in their achievement. Questions remain therefore about why these ethnic groups do not benefit from these advantaging factors in the same way White British students do.

However, most distinctive was the pattern of results for Black Caribbean students. Their gap could not be accounted for by any of the measured contextual variables. They were also the only group making less progress than White British students between age 11 and 14.

**Figure 1: Ethnic achievement gaps in England at age 14 after accounting for increasingly comprehensive sets of explanatory variables**

*Note: For a comprehensive discussion of these results, see Strand, 2010.*



### TIERING AND TEACHER EXPECTATIONS

National tests in mathematics and science at age 14 were structured in tiers, with the highest test outcomes achievable only if students were

entered by their teachers to the higher tiers. Test outcomes are not therefore entirely 'objective' measures, since the outcomes are influenced by teachers' decisions about the tier to which students should be entered. Patterns of entry to higher tier papers for Black African, Pakistani and Bangladeshi groups were consistent with students' prior attainment, indicating no evidence of bias in secondary school teachers' allocation of students to tiers for these ethnic groups. However this was not the case for Black Caribbean students.

Black Caribbean students were under-represented in the higher tiers relative to White British students with the same prior age 11 test scores. Neither could it be explained by differences in any of the family background, parental attitudes, student risk/resilience or school/neighbourhood variables. All other things being equal, for every three White British students entered for the higher tier only two 'similar' Black Caribbean students are entered. The evidence points to systematic under-representation of Black Caribbean students in entry to the higher tier examinations at age 14.

It is not clear why teachers are less likely to enter Black Caribbean students to the higher test tiers. It is well established that the odds of Black Caribbean students being permanently excluded from school are twice as high as the odds for White British students, and that the odds of Black Caribbean students being statemented or at School Action Plus for Behavioural, Emotional and Social Difficulties (BESD) are 2.3 times higher than for White British students. Research suggests that teachers' judgements of students' academic potential can be distorted by affective factors such as perceptions of their behaviour. Black Caribbean students may be disproportionately allocated to lower test tiers, not as a result of direct or conscious discrimination, but because teachers' judgements of the students' academic potential are distorted by perceptions of their behaviour. Teachers are generally cautious and risk-averse with regard to entry to the higher tiers, reflecting a desire to protect students from failure. This may impact negatively on Black Caribbean students, even if their ability is not underestimated, if they are seen as more likely to be disaffected or less motivated, and at greater perceived risk of falling through the tier floor.

## MAJOR IMPLICATIONS

There has been an inordinate focus in the media and in policy over the past 20 years on the gender gap in achievement, but this is actually one of the smaller achievement gaps. Policy needs to focus clearly on the more substantial gaps, particularly in relation to SES. There is a strong relationship between socio-economic disadvantage and ethnicity, and it is highly misleading to compare ethnic achievement gaps without taking into account socio-economic factors. Since a large proportion of the ethnic achievement gap reflects socio-economic disadvantage, then efforts to raise the achievement of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds are likely to also act to close ethnic gaps in achievement.

Black African, Pakistani and Bangladeshi children still achieve less well at age 14 than would be expected, given the high commitment to education of their families and other advantaging factors such as high levels of student educational aspirations, motivation and positive attitudes to school. While subsequent follow-up of the LSYPE sample to age 16 indicates that these ethnic groups make substantial progress in the last two years of secondary school, it is still important that schools consider what other barriers may exist to higher achievement among these ethnic groups earlier in secondary school.

The poor progress and low achievement of Black Caribbean students is perhaps the most striking concern. Follow-up to age 16 continues to indicate low levels of achievement among Black Caribbean students, although White working class students also become prominent underachievers (Strand, in press). The current research suggests that teacher expectations may be one of the factors impacting on the Black Caribbean gap. It is widely recognised that teacher grades are multi-dimensional assessments, measuring not only students' academic knowledge but also teachers' judgements of their effort, participation, attendance and behaviour, as well as other factors such as the extent of parental involvement with the school. The current study demonstrates that Black Caribbean students are systematically under- →

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represented in entry to the higher tiers of national science and mathematics tests at age 14 relative to their White British peers, and these differential entry rates cannot be explained by prior attainment, socio-economic status, or a wide range of measures of

attitudes, aspirations, motivation or school and neighbourhood deprivation.

Schools need to consider the role of institutional arrangements that may contribute to the Black Caribbean achievement gap. For example, schools should monitor and review ethnic patterns in disciplinary actions and the ethnic composition of sets and tiers of entry to GCSE examinations. ●

## FURTHER INFORMATION

The following DfE topic paper reviews ethnic achievement gaps in England:

● DfES (2006) *Ethnicity and education*. London: Department for Education and Skills. Available on the world wide web at: <http://publications.teachernet.gov.uk/eOrderingDownload/DFES-0208-2006.pdf> [accessed 10 June 2013].

Further details on the specific research underlying this *Insight* article can be found in the following papers:

● Strand, S. (2011) The limits of social class in explaining ethnic gaps in educational attainment. *British Educational Research Journal*, 37, (2), 197-229. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01411920903540664>.  
● Strand, S. (2012) The White British-Black Caribbean achievement gap: Tests, tiers

and teacher expectations. *British Educational Research Journal*, 38, (1), 75-101. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01411926.2010.526702>.

### Other relevant research:

● DfE (2012) *A profile of pupil exclusions in England*. Research Report DFE-RR190. London: Department for Education.  
● Strand, S., & Lindsay, G. (2009) Evidence of ethnic disproportionality in special education in an English population. *Journal of Special Education*, 43(3), 174-190. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0022466908320461>  
● Strand, S. (in press) Ethnicity, gender, social class and achievement gaps at age 16: Intersectionality and 'Getting it' for the white working class. *Research Papers in Education*, in press.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

● Steve Strand is Professor of Education at the University of Oxford and was previously Professor of Education at the University of Warwick. He is interested in equity gaps, particularly in relation to ethnicity, social class and gender, in a wide range of outcomes such as educational achievement, progress, attendance, exclusion and special educational needs. Steve has been a consultant to the England Department for Education, serving on the Black Pupils Achievement Group and the Gender Agenda.

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