Why Black girls don't matter: exploring how race and gender shape academic success in an inner city school

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The continued low academic attainment of Black pupils is now a well-established, familiar feature of the annual statistics of educational attainment. Black pupils tend to consistently perform below their white counterparts and below the national average. Key debates, examining how to address the difference in attainment gap, have tended to focus almost exclusively on the achievements of Black male pupils with little explicit attention paid to the needs and experiences of their female counterparts. Based on ethnographic research that explores how staff and pupils at an inner city secondary school construct academic success, this paper reveals how and why Black female pupils have become silenced in these debates. Employing a Bourdieuian framework, it is argued that while prevalent discourses on femininity serve to increase Black girls' legitimacy in the context of dominant school discourses on academic success, those on ethnicity serve simultaneously to downgrade their legitimacy, both minimizing their opportunities for high status academic success and rendering them invisible in the debates on Black attainment.

Key words: Black girls, exclusion, cultural capital, femininity/masculinity, achievement.

Background

Key educational issues in relation to Black pupils

Academic success in English educational policy is traditionally understood in terms of the percentage of pupils achieving a minimum of five A* to C grade passes in their General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSEs) and equivalent examinations usually taken at age sixteen, at the end of compulsory schooling. Relatively few Black pupils attain at this level, with the picture being particularly bleak for Black male pupils and pupils of Caribbean heritage.

However, as the data in Table 1 show, while 14.3% more Black girls attained the crucial benchmark of success than their male counterparts in 2006, this within-group comparison misleadingly positions Black girls as doing well. Further examination of the data shows that they are, in fact, achieving well below their white female counterparts (who tend to achieve near the national average) and below the national average. In addition, when the statistics for the Black group are disaggregated, the data reveals that the percentage differences are even starker for those pupils of Black Caribbean heritage. In 2006, for example, 7.4% more white girls achieved five or more A* to C grades than Black girls. However, when compared with the attainment of Black Caribbean girls for the same period this difference rises to 9.6%. Therefore, comparing the educational attainment of Black girls solely with Black boys over-emphasizes Black girls' achievements as successful when this, in fact, is merely relative in comparison with the already well-established low attainment of their predominantly failing male counterparts (Rollock, 2006a).

Table 1. The percentage of Black and white pupils achieving five or more A* to C grades in GCSE and equivalent by gender, 2005, 2006 (sources DfES, 2005, 2006a)

Ethnicity	2005		2006	
	Boys	*Girls*	*Boys*	*Girls*
Black	37.7	51.4	40.3	54.6
Black Caribbean	33.3	49.4	35.9	52.4
Black African	42.9	53.3	44.3	56.1
Any other Black background	33.7	50.8	38.9	55.7
White	50.3	60.2	52.6	62.0
White British	50.2	60.1	52.6	61.9
All pupils	49.9	60.0	52.2	61.9

Gender differences are only part of a very complex picture of educational attainment. Differences exist for those pupils receiving and not receiving free school meals,[1] with a higher percentage of pupils in the latter group achieving C grades and above at GCSE than those receiving such meals (Gillborn and Mirza, 2000). In terms of free school meals and ethnicity, while more Black girls and boys who are in receipt of free school meals tend to achieve at these levels compared with their white peers, this may reflect the fact that there is greater variance in social class among white pupils than with Black pupils, with the latter experiencing greater levels of deprivation than their white counterparts (DfES, 2006c; Kenway and Palmer, 2007).

Permanent exclusions are another key feature of the schooling experience of Black pupils, again with debates almost exclusively focusing on the disproportionate number of Black males excluded from school. While this is a valid concern, examination of government data indicates that they ought to also extend to Black girls, who are approximately twice as likely to be permanently excluded from school compared with the total school population and their white female peers (DfES 2006b).

This paper considers evidence from an ethnographic study of the experiences of academically successful Black pupils in an inner city secondary school. Aware of the invisibility of Black girls in educational research (Henry, 1998; Mirza, 2006), I was keen to include them and an analysis of the role of gender in the study. However, findings from the staff interviews reveal an almost exclusive focus on Black male pupils, with Black girls occupying an invisible or 'absent presence' (Apple, 1999) in staff discourses of both academic success and failure. Using a Bourdieuian framework and drawing on both staff and pupil data, I explore how and why Black girls become positioned in this way and consider what this might mean for their overall academic success. First, a brief overview of the key concepts from Bourdieu's theoretical analyses that have been useful in articulating the arguments laid out in this paper.

An outline of key Bourdieuian concepts

Bourdieu's concepts of field, habitus and cultural capital are particularly helpful in establishing a space for both individual and structural influences, and I follow Reay (1998, 2004) and Connolly (1998) in arguing that while Bourdieu centres much of his theoretical analysis around social class inequalities (for example, Bourdieu, 1986a), it can also be usefully adapted for analyses of gender and ethnicity.

Briefly, Bourdieu argues that social action takes place in particular sites or fields, each of which is governed by particular ways of functioning, which in turn also serve as boundaries, distinguishing one field from another. Gaining and retaining membership of a particular field requires individuals to have knowledge of an enormous amount of information. He argues that:

It is difficult to conceive of the vast amount of information which is linked to membership of a field and which all contemporaries immediately invest their reading of works: information about institutions – e.g. academies, journals, magazines, galleries, publishers, etc. and about persons, their relationships, liaisons and quarrels, information about the ideas and problems which are 'in the air' and circulate orally in gossip and rumour.

Bourdieu (1993, p. 32)

Part of the challenge for members of any field is to determine which – to continue the above example – academies, journals or magazines have the most currency, so that by closely affiliating with them, for example through frequent publications in high status journals, members are seen as having legitimacy within that field. Inequality arises, however, since what is and what is not given value or currency is decided by the dominant groups within the field. Further, while these 'systems of domination' (Johnson, 1993, p. 2) express themselves in virtually all the values and statuses assigned to social action and resources within the field, they are, in fact, *arbitrary* values in that they are randomly ascribed and socially imposed and do not represent any degree of absoluteness or intrinsic truth. In addition, members of the field often *misrecognize* these implicit arbitrary value-systems, which become embedded in these resources creating, therefore, further scope for inequity. The field, therefore, becomes a site of tension, and in some cases conflict, where subjugated or dominated groups struggle to access power through these resources and dominant groups, in turn, grapple to maintain it.

Capital refers to the set of usable resources and powers available to each individual within the field (Bourdieu, 1986b). It can be best understood as a form of social currency or a social product of the field. There are three key forms of capital: economic, cultural and social. *Social capital* relates to:

membership in a group – which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectively owned capital, a 'credential' which entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the word.

(Bourdieu, 1986b, p. 248).

Cultural capital is described as relating to 'forms of cultural knowledge, competences or dispositions'. It is important to understand that in his use of 'culture', Bourdieu is rejecting it in its 'restricted, normative sense of ordinary usage' and embracing a broader meaning based on the 'anthropological' relating to human practice and way of being (Bourdieu, 1986a). Finally, *economic capital* refers to that which is 'immediately and directly convertible into money and may be institutionalised in the form of property rights' (Bourdieu, 1986b).

Cultural capital, itself, can exist in three forms: the *embodied state* 'in the form of long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body', that is, things that 'decline and die with its bearer' (Bourdieu, 1986b, p. 245) such as accent,

disposition, way of walking; the *objectified state* in the form of cultural goods, such as pictures, books, music; and the *institutionalized state*, which reflects qualifications and institutionally sanctioned forms of status (Bourdieu, 1986a; Grenfell and James, 1998). Individuals enter the education field with differing amounts of capital, depending, for example, on family background and upbringing or family connections.

I use these Bourdieuian concepts as a way of exploring the ways in which Black girls are positioned as absent in staff perspectives of academic success, and examine in the discussion how this may contribute to their exclusion from key debates on school achievement that focus on solely on ethnicity or gender.

Methodology

Semi-structured interviews were carried out with twenty-one school staff and twenty-four pupils at a co-educational inner city secondary school, fictitiously called Metropolitan High, about how they defined, understood and practised academic success. Staff included senior management, heads of subject areas, as well as support staff, who included members of the inclusion team. Boys and girls from a range of ethnic backgrounds from Years 9, 10 and 11 were interviewed. These year groups were seen as central to exploring constructions of success as pupils approached the end of Year 11, when they usually take their GCSE examinations. Strict gate-keeping by the headteacher limited the possibility of classroom observation (Rollock, 2006b, p. 16), but observational data was collected from staff meetings, assemblies and achievement evenings. Additional information regarding school policies and guidelines, pupil exclusions and inspection reports was also collected.

Findings

Staff at Metropolitan High (Met) subscribed to two definitions of academic success, what I term an *inclusive success* relating to the attainment of D to G grades at GCSE and/or development in personal skills and an *exclusive success*, relating to the attainment of A* to C grades at GCSE (see Rollock, 2006, p. 58 for further discussion). These forms of success were constructed in relation to the perceived capabilities of the particular types of pupil who attended Met, which in turn was regarded as shaped and skewed by the school's admissions policy and those less equitable admission practices of neighbouring schools:

> 'a lot of the children in the area are creamed by other schools because we still have grammar schools, call them what you will, 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 A, white male)

In this remark, the analogy of cream evokes a vivid image of the filtering process involved in local schools' selection of pupils and in the parental choosing of schools as well as alluding to the perceived status or quality of particular kinds of pupils (Ball, 2003). It clearly positions Metropolitan High as disadvantaged, as being left with pupils who are seen as having little value and little academic worth and, in this instance, who include girls of less than desirable character. However, the status of Met's female pupils in this comment is constructed in direct comparison with those at neighbouring schools since, within the context of Metropolitan High itself, girls, or rather the embodiment of the female form, were seen as high currency. Girls at Met were regarded as able to demonstrate the perceived appropriate behaviours commensurate with achieving academic success:

> '. . . there's more pressure now to study, you have to have your coursework handed, 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 organized, 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 B, white 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 and their boys' toys, girls are thinking career, aren't they, for the most part?
>
> (Senior management team, Black female A)

Being female, therefore, according to these members of staff, predisposes girls to be motivated, focused and organized, positioning male pupils, by comparison, as deficient in these areas. These comments reveal that differences in approaches to academic work are placed and understood within a fixed paradigm of uninterrogated essentialist constructions of gender. Therefore, simply being female affords girls at Met an embodied state that automatically imbues them with status and legitimacy within the dominant discourses of the school (Bourdieu, 1986a). In this context, it therefore becomes easier for staff to situate girls as requiring less surveillance than boys, who are seen to embody and practise less 'desirable learner identities' (Youdell, 2003) and therefore require more frequent monitoring of their work and behaviour.

While these comments do not make reference to ethnicity, they clearly demonstrate the legitimacy afforded to different sets of pupils depending on their gendered positioning and the ways in which this might play out in terms of treatment by staff. Being subject to less stringent targeting and monitoring than boys is likely to contribute ultimately to girls occupying a less visible position in the school. The following section reveals how these gendered constructions form part of a more complex construction of the profile of

the academically successful pupil which is informed and shaped by perceptions about ethnicity and, specifically, about being Black.

Almost but not quite fitting in: intersections of ethnicity and femininity

Staff views

When asked how an academically successful pupil might be identified, while referring to characteristics such as willingness to work hard and motivation, which, as I have already shown were largely seen as the domain of female pupils, staff also highlighted quite specific elements of pupils' appearance and behaviour:

> 'Well, (. . .) let me see – academically successful – I am trying to think of the opposite to that. Yeah, you could find a real clean tidy looking girl but that wouldn't prove anything and you could see a clean tidy Afro-Caribbean boy and he could be the worse boy in the school [*chuckles*]. His mum would dress him up nice in the morning but he could be . . . yeah, I don't know how you'd tell. . . . Well, they wouldn't be scruffy, they wouldn't be wearing the whole . . . they wouldn't have the whole like, 'I don't care thing' . . . the hat, the whatever.'
>
> (Maths teacher A, white male)

This comment usefully conveys the (in)visibility of particular forms of identities and sets of pupils within Metropolitan High school. In this example, the girl remains without an ethnicity, yet the boy is explicitly and immediately positioned as 'Afro-Caribbean', indicating not just the importance of ethnicity, for staff, in shaping particularly boys' but not necessarily girls' identity, but also the significance attached to being a male pupil of African Caribbean heritage. This nuanced but telling juxtaposition of ethnicity and gender is demonstrated more powerfully through the following fieldwork notes, written after a conversation with a member of the inclusion team. After having approached me to express her interest in the research, she began to reflect on the number of Black boys generally being excluded from school:

> [She says she is] curious as to why this is. Proffers [her own] question regarding culture, parenting/lack of support at home. Also mentioned clothes that sixth formers wear. Some of Black boys image – take it from America ([it is] not British culture). 'You see them with their jackets and those hoods pulled down over their heads and those things [bandanas] around their head. They might be innocent but *you* would cross the road if you saw them.'
>
> (Support staff, white female, original emphasis)

This comment is important for several reasons. First, the references to America and to particular forms of headwear, also echoed by other female members of staff, reflects a fixed and unsophisticated analysis of identity as she

attempts to establish an impenetrable dichotomy between American and British youth cultures. Second, by drawing me, a Black woman, into her account – '*you* would cross the road' – she seeks to collude with me and, in so doing, conveys various messages. She suggests that despite sharing the same ethnicity as these boys – that is, despite also being Black – I will share her anxiety and nervousness and also seek to avoid them. By constructing her sentence in this way, she cleverly intimates that her observation is not merely a crude analysis based on ethnicity alone, which has the added benefit of providing her with a certain protection, as a white member of staff, from accusations of stereotyping and racism. She is also able, through this comment, to draw on our shared gender to suggest that I would also reach similar conclusions about the threat that these Black boys pose. Interestingly, the exact nature of this threat, which Gillborn (1990, p. 39) refers to as the 'myth of the Afro-Caribbean challenge' (see also Sewell, 1999), is never made explicit but, in fact, is thoroughly embedded in a fear of both the ethnicity and masculinity of these undesirable bodies (Youdell, 2003) and is further magnified by their being attired in forms of clothing attributed by mainstream society as the symbolic domain of criminals, delinquents and general no-gooders (Cohen, 2002; Rollock, 2005). This fear, expressed by both Black and white female staff, culminated in a wary vigilance of Black male pupils, vividly expressed in the following comment:

> '. . . when he first came in – I went to his primary school – he was a delightful little boy, and this is gonna sound really ridiculous perhaps, but he became *very very tall very quickly* and he stood out and I think that that's when he began to try to be a bit of a . . . a bit of a mover.'
>
> (Senior management team, white female B, original emphasis)

This teacher is providing an explanation of why a Black male pupil, she once would have described as academically successful, is no longer successful. The use of 'delightful' and 'little' conveys a degree of amicability and manageable cuteness in terms of the pupil's size and height during primary school. The problems in his behaviour began not just as a result of his height gain, according to this member of the senior management team but – as evidenced by the emphatic repetition of the word 'very' – because the growth was so sudden, allowing insufficient time for those around him to adjust. It can be argued, therefore, that to be Black is to represent an illegitimate embodied state within Met, which in part contributes to Black pupils' increased surveillance by staff, their disproportionate representation in school exclusion figures and, their overestimation by staff in the pupil population.[2] However, as Connolly (1998) argues, this illegitimacy is tempered differentially according to the gender of the pupil, so that:

> . . . discourses on femininity help to downplay the emphasis on the volatile and aggressive nature of Black girls, while those on masculinity act to over-emphasize these characteristics for Black boys.
>
> (*ibid*., p. 15)

In other words, the dominant staff discourses about girls as academically competent serve to increase Black girls' legitimacy in the school which their ethnicity otherwise minimizes. They are able to be positioned as less of a cause for concern compared with their male counterparts, which, at least partially, explains why Black girls rarely featured in the discussions with school staff. However, as I now proceed to show, Black girls were also more likely than Black boys to share staff perceptions about the importance and role of school uniform as a signifier of success, further contributing to their legitimacy within the school.

Pupils' views

A small number of pupils (six of the twenty-four interviewed) considered that girls might be more likely to achieve success than boys, with some male pupils tending to attribute this to aspects of girls' comparable maturity, a finding reported previously by Francis (2007). However, the prevalent view of both male and female pupils was that anyone could be academically successful if they were focused and prepared to work hard. There were noticeable differences between Black girls' and Black boys' comments, however, in their descriptions of how successful pupils might be identified:

'[successful students are] the ones who wear perfect school uniform every day and they're never told to change their trainers or put on their blazers . . .'

(Year 11, Black female A)

'[You can tell successful students by] the way they wear their uniform, they are smart, they probably have it ironed. If you ironed it, then it shows that you probably actually care about how you look and how people look at you.'

(Year 11, Black female B)

These girls share similar values to their teachers (described earlier) in recognizing the symbolic value attached to and embedded in appearance as a signifier of academic success. While they, unlike staff, do not identify *specific* forms of dress as problematic, they do recognize the status attached to wearing the right school uniform and of paying a particular attention to looking neat, as was evident in their own appearance during interviews and when observed on other occasions throughout the school. This shared perception with staff about the role of school uniform increases their legitimacy within the school as 'good pupils' and situates them, therefore, as pupils who do not require high levels of monitoring during the various uniform checks that staff conducted at the end of assemblies and at the beginning of lessons, consequently reducing opportunities for staff–pupil conflict. This contrasts with Black male pupils who *misrecognize* the value attached to appearance, disregarding it as irrelevant to the pen and paper process of completing work and succeeding academically:

I don't like our Maths teacher because when you go into the classroom, you have to sit down, take off our coats and then we all have to stand up and he makes us . . . our ties have to be strangling us and our shirts have to be tucked in and our top button has to be done up as well. He does that every lesson and if it is not done then we can't sit down. I don't think there is any need to be doing that, especially in Year 11, he should just let us sit down and get on with the work.

(Year 11, Black Caribbean male)

NR 'And which is your least favourite teacher?'

'Maths teacher probably, because he always gives us a uniform check at the beginning of every lesson. Yeah, like at the beginning of every lesson we have to stand up and do our ties and stuff – see how our tie is done. Usually I don't do it.'

(Year 9, Black African male)

The Black boys reported here found uniform checks tedious, pedantic and extraneous to teaching and learning, and they often resulted in or contributed to their dislike of those teachers who were committed to carrying them out. They reported feeling frustrated, complaining about the purpose of uniform checks in the context of their academic work. However, just as Black girls' adherence to school uniform guidelines is likely to have contributed to staff positioning them with some degree of favour, the rejection, interrogation and misrecognition of the importance of the uniform guidelines is likely to cause staff to further position Black male pupils as difficult and create a further dichotomy in the ways in which they are viewed compared to Black girls. Therefore, the schooling experiences and educational attainment of Black girls constantly becomes subjugated when viewed through the perpetually problematic comparative lens of their Black male peers.

Discussion

In view of their relatively low levels of educational attainment and number in school exclusions, it is not immediately apparent how or why Black girls remain excluded from the frequent debates surrounding the educational achievement of Black pupils. However, by examining staff and pupil accounts of academic success and failure at one inner-city school, it has been possible to suggest how this might occur. I argue that Black girls become viewed in direct relation to the sets of ongoing bothered beliefs and contentious concerns that exist for Black boys. Certain aspects of Black girls' embodied cultural capital, that is, their gender, as well as more dominant school discourses that unquestioningly situate the female body as academically predisposed, serve to increase Black girls' legitimacy in the school, minimize their surveillance compared to their Black male counterparts, and allow them to be included in school discourse as 'good pupils'. Black girls also do not pose the same level of threat and intimidation for female staff as do their male peers, but their ethnicity still ensures, as I experienced first-hand, their

visibility. The visibility and negative meanings afforded to Blackness, magnified in the context of the uninterrogated *in*visibility of whiteness (Leonardo, 2002), is evident also in the nervous gaze leant to Black bodies that sees staff exaggerate, for example, the number of Black pupils in the school. Of course, the meanings inscribed in these bodies become variously magnified or muted according to their gender.

In posing the arguments laid out in this paper, I do not intend to contribute to an essentialist pedagogy by suggesting that all Black girls are the same or that they are collectively viewed and treated the same way by all teachers (see also Mills and Keddie, 2007) but wish to highlight, as others have done (Henry, 1998; Mirza, 2006), the silence surrounding their schooling experiences and achievement and consider how and why their general exclusion exists in the first place. In addition, the concerns expressed about the educational attainment of Black (and notably Black Caribbean) boys remain a valid area of address for policy makers and practitioners but should not exist in place of, or overshadow, the sets of equally important educational issues surrounding Black girls and how they can become included in debates on schooling.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1. Usually taken as an indicator of poverty.

2. Teachers frequently stressed the great number of Black pupils attending Metropolitan High when, in fact, the school's own Ofsted report revealed that there were roughly equal numbers of Black and white pupils and, specifically, there were almost three times as many white as Black Caribbean pupils. Of course, this provides evidence not only for the heightened visibility of Blackness, but of the invisibility and lack of critique afforded to whiteness as a social construct (Leonardo, 2002; Howard, 2004).

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